Birds of myriad feathers flock to Joan Sommer's yard in the Village of Fredonia. If you don't see them, you can hear them singing in the trees and bushes, waiting for her to fill the feeders in her small yard.

She counted 18 feeders last week, but may have missed a few, and she's always adding more.

"I've come to believe that birds like to feed in flocks, probably for safety, so if you put out only one feeder, they're less inclined to come to it," Sommer said.

"I once had 100 goldfinches at one time. The more feeders you have, the more birds that will come. You don't have to have fancy feeders."

Each of her feeders holds a single type of seed that appeals to specific birds. She doesn't buy mixed birdseed.

"If you use a mixed feed, particularly one that contains corn, millet and wheat fillers, a lot of it is wasted and ends up on the ground," she said. "I try to avoid anything with corn.

"Think about what kinds of birds you want to attract and go from there."

This has been a so-called irruption year, Sommer said, meaning birds that normally stay farther north are migrating to the area for food.

She's seen or heard pine siskins, common redpolls, pine grosbeaks and evening grosbeaks.

There are also some late departures for southern climates, she said.

"One man in Washington County still has Baltimore orioles, and there are at least three hummingbirds still around," Sommer said.

One of Sommer's favorite feed is black-oil sunflower seeds, which attract a variety of birds.

Squirrels and house sparrows don't like safflower seeds, but they attract white-breasted nuthatches, cardinals, chickadees and house finches.

Shelled peanuts attract chickadees, nuthatches and woodpeckers.

“I have downy, hairy and red-bellied woodpeckers. I usually get all three most days,” Sommer said.

“Goldfinches are pretty accepting of almost anything. They love thistle and shelled sunflower seeds.”

Sommer enjoys feeding all birds except invasive house sparrows, and she goes to great lengths to discourage them.

Strands of nylon fishing line hang from several feeders to discourage the sparrows.

“I read that house sparrows don’t like the blowing fishing line, so I tried it and it works. I seldom see house sparrows,” she said.

One of her favorite feeders is an all-weather one that she fills with shelled sunflower seeds. The seeds stay dry in a clear container above a caged opening that birds fly into to feed from the bottom of the container.

“It took a while for the birds to figure out how to use it. I kept moving it around until a smart goldfinch figured it out and taught everybody else,” Sommer said.

Those feeders are now the most popular.

Sommer buys her seed in fall when new crop seeds are on sale and stores them in galvanized garbage cans in the garage, leaving just enough room for either her or her husband Michael’s car in the small garage.

“This year, seed is really expensive,” she said. “So if you find a good deal on black-oil sunflower seeds, grab it.”

In the fall, she bought 400 pounds of shelled sunflower seeds, 150 pounds of thistle seed and 120 pounds of black-oil sunflower seeds. She also has lots of safflower seeds, shelled peanuts and peanuts in the shell.

Mesh socks filled with thistle seed are easy to hang anywhere and attract goldfinches that now have brown winter plumage so many people don’t recognize them, Sommer noted.

“Suet is another great thing to have,” Sommer said. “You can buy suet cakes or get it from meat markets and put in a mesh bag. Birds love that.”

People shouldn’t worry if they have to discontinue filling their feeders because they are out of town.

“The birds that come to our back yards get a small percentage of their nutritional needs from

our feeders," Sommer said.

"Even more important than feed is water. I have a simple heated bird bath that I fill every morning.

"They can use snow for water, but it requires a lot more energy."

Because she attracts so many birds to her yard, a Cooper's hawk also shows up regularly.

"See how quiet it got? The Cooper's hawk is around," Sommer said as she stood in the yard last week.

Sommer knows the feeding habits of regular visitors to her yard.

"Black-capped chickadees will take one sunflower or safflower seed and go to a tree," she said. "White-breasted nuthatches will take a single safflower seed and cache it in the bark of a tree. Blue jays will pick up several peanuts before deciding which one to eat.

"Cardinals are the first ones to the feeders in the morning and the last ones at night."

Sommer wakes up every morning to blue jays and crows squawking because she hasn't put peanuts out yet.

"They like the peanuts in the shell," she said. "Some people aren't fond of blue jays and crows, but they're only doing what they're supposed to do. I have three crows. I call them the Three Stooges."

Sommer said her parents had lots of bird feeders, so when she and her husband bought their home in Fredonia, she immediately put out a couple feeders.

Many people position feeders so they can watch the birds from inside the house, but that means they are near windows that endanger the winged creatures. To keep birds from flying into windows, Sommer puts ultraviolet decals on windows. The decals reflect UV light that birds can see but humans can't.

In addition to feeding birds, Sommer bands birds at Riveredge Nature Center in the Town of Saukville to track breeding patterns.

She maintains two bluebird trails — one with 26 houses at Hawthorne Hills Golf Course in the Town of Saukville and another with 10 houses at Forest Beach Migratory Bird Preserve in the Town of Belgium. She will start monitoring the bluebird houses in mid-March. Last summer, 111 bluebird chicks fledged at the golf course, with the last ones leaving the nest in August.

She participated in five Christmas bird counts this year.

That's in addition to working full time as a librarian at Marquette University in Milwaukee.

“I started out birding to see how many I could identify,” Sommer said.

“Now, it’s birding with a purpose. We’ve had such a negative impact on our bird populations that I look at what I can actually do to make a difference.”

Photo by Sam Arendt