

The “Back Off” Story by Alex Newhart

I started a project last winter to photograph all of the birds that visit my bird feeders. It was a way to practice my photography skills and compliment Project Feederwatch that I collect data for every year.

One of the more aggressive birds at the feeders is the Red-bellied Woodpecker (*Melanerpes carolinus*). These birds feed on seeds, nuts and suet, often consuming quite a lot every day. I love to photograph the birds on snowy days as it adds an extra element to the images that make them more interesting. On these days there is also an increase in the number of birds visiting the feeders.

Usually the Red-bellied Woodpeckers have a suet feeder to themselves, but on a snowy day the other birds will try to get in there to get some of the seeds for themselves. This leads to tension between the birds and as I was aware it would happen, I focused on a woodpecker feeding on suet at the end of a feeder and waited. I set my camera at a fast shutter speed with a flash attached and began to shoot a rapid series of photos as the birds gathered. The Red-bellied Woodpecker did not like the competition at the feeder so he struck out at a White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) and a pair of Northern Cardinals (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) that were crowding him. Everything happened very fast. I did not know what I had until I reviewed the images later.