

BEHAVIOR NOTES ON WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILLS DURING THE 1953 INCURSION ON LONG ISLAND

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The White-winged Crossbill (*Loxia leucoptera*) is an exceedingly irregular and rare winter visitant in the vicinity of New York City. Every few years a small flock may be reported, especially from the Montauk area at the eastern tip of Long Island, but there had been no real incursion since 1899-1900. It seems remarkable that in the unusually mild winter of 1952-53, characterized by the presence of many species normally wintering well to the south, there should also be a great influx of these boreal finches. The birds were first noted early in February 1953, but rapidly disappeared during the two weeks following their arrival, though occasional individuals were reported as late as May.

The first report came on February 5, from Jones Beach State Park, where there was also noted for the first time this winter a few Common Redpolls (*Acanthis linaria*) in a flock of Pine Siskin (*Spinus pinus*). Significantly, this winter had been characterized by an unusual number of Red Crossbills (*Loxia curvirostra*), but these had attained maximum numbers in late November and early December. Siskins, too, had been strikingly numerous in November, but by January had almost disappeared. On February 8 during a trip on the outer beach from Riis Park (near the tip of the Rockaway Peninsula) to Jones Beach, almost every spot where there were planted pines back of the dunes, we found White-winged Crossbills. I estimate seeing between 100 and 150 birds, but I am sure there must have been many times that number on this strip. The White-winged Crossbill gave the impression of being the most numerous native passerine in the area, for they seemed to be almost everywhere. Actually the Siskins were probably more numerous, but they were concentrated in several nervous flocks containing a few Redpolls. The White-winged Crossbills were distributed in scattered small groups. The largest group I personally counted had 14, but a few flying groups may have been somewhat larger. These birds did not at all show the restlessness so characteristic of wintering Red Crossbills.

In fact their behavior was different in several respects. The Red Crossbill in winter is arboreal and almost exclusively a feeder on the seeds of conifers; one seldom sees them on the ground, except momentarily or when drinking at a puddle. The White-winged Crossbills were almost invariably feeding on the ground. While they took to the trees when startled, and generally landed on trees when flying from any distance, they almost always soon dropped to the ground. We saw a few extracting seed from pine cones, but their chief food during my observations was taken from the ground. They picked up grass-seed, dried fallen fruit of the cultivated *Elaeagnus*, and dropped-seed of several other ornamental shrubs. Almost always the birds fed under, or not far from, planted pine trees, though in some instances they spread over nearby grass plots. One suspects that they were drawn to a particular spot by the presence of the pines and then found other food more abundant or attractive. Possibly most of the ripe pine cones had already been denuded by the Red Crossbills in November and December, and there may have been some pine seed on the ground. So different were they to the presence of people that as they fed on the ground one could approach within two or three feet, and the birds would at times hop even nearer. In my presence two boys each captured a bird with their caps. In fact I have never seen passerine birds that were so completely unsuspicious of man.

Pough in his "Audubon Bird Guide", p. 236, says: "Our two crossbills present an interesting problem. They are closely related, similar in habits and the ecological niche they occupy, yet they apparently thrive in the same area without one tending to displace the other". This is a reference to the opinion expressed by some ornithologists, notably David Lack, that two closely allied species cannot at the same time occupy the same area and the same ecological niche. The foregoing observations, unless they represent an abnormal condition, suggest that the two crossbills, in winter at least, may have different feeding preferences and behavior. If this holds true on the breeding ground, perhaps the two species do occupy somewhat different ecological niches in the great coniferous forest.