

THE HOUSE FINCH IN NEW YORK STATE

By GILBERT CANT

"If in some way the American house-finch could be induced to come east," wrote Leander S. Keyser in *Birds and Nature* in 1902, "and the English sparrow could be given papers of extradition, the exchange would be a relief and benefit to the whole country." Belatedly, the House Finch has been induced to settle in the East, and its greatest concentrations in its new habitat lie in New York State. Because it is easily confused with the Eastern Purple Finch by observers who are not especially alert for it, and because it is not shown in the manuals and field guides most commonly used in this region, the House Finch represents an appealing challenge to New York bird lovers.

In the United States, the original range of the House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus frontalis*) extended from the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Coast, and as far north as Boulder, Colo. and Provo, Utah, with a slight bulge farther to the north along the California coast. Since the days of the Spanish missions the species has been noted for its adaptability to living around, and even on, human habitations. This alone may explain its spread into Wyoming, Idaho and Oregon as those states became more heavily settled. But the explanation of the House Finch's appearance in the East is as different as it is remarkable. For the bird is virtually non-migratory in the West, and it appears to be especially immune to the accidents which have sent "strays" of many other species across the continent. Indeed, the House Finch is not known to have occurred *naturally* anywhere east of the 100th meridian.

But for almost half a century there was a heavy cage-bird trade in House Finches, under such names as "California Linnets" and "Hollywood Finches." They were trapped as pests around California orchards, and sold for an average of 25 cents each. In 1933, I received a pair, bought as a gift in a pet shop in metropolitan New Jersey. The fact that I thought of releasing them, before I gave them to the New York Zoological Society, raises the question whether others had not been released by owners who recognized them as wild-caught, adult birds and therefore untamable.

So far as we can now ascertain, the first deliberate introduction of the House Finch in the East was in Brooklyn in 1940. This has been well documented by John J. Elliott and Robert S. Arbib Jr. in *The Auk* (1953). By a legal quirk, the House Finch had been put on the list of birds protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty with Mexico (despite its non-migratory habits!) This enabled the National Audubon Society to bring down the law on proprietors of about 20 pet shops which had stocks of the birds. Several pet-shop owners, probably in Manhattan as well as in Brooklyn, disposed of the evidence against them by the simple expedient of releasing the birds. Nobody expected them to survive in a climate so different from that of their native habitat. (Until then, aside from game birds, only the Rock Dove, Starling and House Sparrow had successfully colonized the eastern states, although more than 20 species of songbirds had been hopefully introduced from Europe.)

But a House Finch in the feral state was seen at Jones Beach in Nassau County, in April of 1941, and the species was found nesting at Babylon two years later. The first unquestionable record of a House Finch on the eastern mainland was at Tarrytown, in Westchester County, in May of 1948, followed by records at Bedford and Armonk in 1951. The first record for Connecticut, at Riverside, only a few miles from the Westchester line, also occurred in late 1951.

It is often assumed, as in the *Audubon Magazine* for July-August, 1958, that these mainland birds were descended from an overflow of the Long Island colonies. There is no evidence for this. There are, as yet, no records of House Finches banded on Long Island and recovered on the mainland to the north. On the other hand, two banded at Riverside have been recovered on Long Island. It is possible that House Finches bred on the mainland for several years before they were identified there. In fact, some of the keenest field observers, going over their old records, are now putting question marks against their identifications of "Purple Finches" at unusual locations in the breeding season.

How likely it is that the two species have been confused, even by experienced and careful observers, has been emphasized in the last few years. Banders have the advantage of holding the bird in the hand and can study it closely, yet virtually every eastern bander I know has misidentified his first House Finch as a Purple. The second factor contributing to the confusion is that the Purple Finch is also extending its breeding range, and is moving into areas where some of us have become accustomed to seeing House Finches. So it will be well to settle the identifying features as best we can. Unfortunately, most of the commonly used guides emphasize the least reliable features for distinguishing between the two species.

Body build is extremely characteristic. The Purple Finch is "broad-shouldered" and built short and heavy, like a House Sparrow, whereas the House Finch is noticeably sleeker and is built more like an American Tree Sparrow. The tail is proportionately shorter in the Purple Finch, and appears broader; its central feathers are shorter than the outer ones, giving the tail a "notched" appearance which is usually visible at a moderate distance. The House Finch's tail appears longer and straighter, and rarely shows a notch (except perhaps during the moult).

Color is equally important but more variable. The adult male Purple Finch is well described by Roger Tory Peterson as appearing to have been "dipped in raspberry juice." This bright color covers the entire head. The male House Finch is not necessarily "brighter red," as is often stated. Its reddish coloration ranges all the way from tawny or orange, through rose and "old rose," to what we might call strawberry. (I have seen only one individual so deeply "raspberry" colored as to be confusing.) A major difference is in the distribution of the reddish color on the House Finch: it is not continuous, as from a "dipping" process, but is concentrated on the forehead and the back of the head and nape, leaving the crown a dull brown. It also extends, of course, to the throat and rump.

The spotting and streaking and the color of the underparts are decidedly different. The female and immature male Purple Finch have contrasting lines on the lower jaw, which the House Finch lacks. Purple Finches in this plumage have whitish or creamy underparts, contrastingly marked with heavy spots of a raindrop shape. Only rarely do these extend to the flanks, vent area and lower tail coverts; these areas are usually clear in the Purple Finch. The entire underparts of the House Finch are dusky in all plumages. Adult males resemble females and immatures in being streaked (with longish, narrow streaks) on their dusky flanks and under tail coverts. The females and immatures have darker, dusky underparts with streaking throughout, from throat to under tail coverts.

Body build and coloration are relative and variable, but there is one other characteristic difference which is virtually absolute: the shape of the bill. The Purple Finch's bill has a straight line along its upper edge (culmen), whereas the House Finch's is curved in an aquiline or "Roman" shape.

Finally there are differences in voice, some of which can best be learned from the excellent records now available, though they generally omit the call notes. The commonest call note of the House Finch is somewhat like that of the English Sparrow, but is slightly longer and has a different "timbre"; though this is hard to describe in words, it is easily recognized once it has been learned. One of the Purple Finch's most characteristic notes, its "ticking", is never heard from the House Finch. As for full song, that of the Purple Finch is more liquid and lilting; the House Finch's is somewhat drier, and nearly always ends in an energetic, drawn-out "shweeccc" of poor musical quality.

When Elliott first found the House Finch nesting at Babylon it showed a preference for ornamental evergreens in nursery plantings. The birds still like these nesting sites, but as they have become more numerous it has become clear that nestings are about equally divided between specimen evergreens and buildings. Nests have been found behind screens and shutters, lodged in trellises, or in vines such as ivy and wisteria attached to buildings.

The most remarkable and gratifying aspect of the House Finch's introduction in the East is its rapid spread and increase in numbers. It may not be capable of handing "papers of extradition" to the House Sparrow, but appears able to compete successfully with it. Less than ten years ago, in the summer of 1952, only five breeding colonies were known: at Babylon, Westbury, Hewlett and Lawrence, all in Nassau County, and one in Connecticut. Now there are dozens.

The species has extended its range about 50 miles eastward, mainly along the south shore of Long Island, to East Islip, Sayville, Blue Point, Amityville, Brookhaven and East Moriches. On the north shore there is a flourishing colony at Cold Spring Harbor around the Kalbfleisch Research Station. Fall and winter, when the birds disperse without apparent pattern from their breeding sites, have produced records as far east as the Hamptons and Montauk. Some clue to the birds' numbers can be

gleaned from the fact that Leroy Wilcox has banded more than 400, with one of his cooperators banding 120 in a single month.

It is remarkable that there are as yet no records from such famous "bird traps" as Prospect and Central Parks in New York City, and none from Staten Island. For there is intriguing evidence from banding returns that many House Finches, from both Long Island and the Westchester-Connecticut mainland, have established a migration pattern which carries them across central New Jersey to the Philadelphia area. At least two birds that I banded in Mamaroneck during the summer have been trapped during the following winter at Ardmore, Penna., and have returned to my area for the next breeding season. About a dozen records of "one-way trips" between these areas, with the Pennsylvania recoveries all in the winter, suggest that the migration involves many more birds, and that so far we have simply failed to trap enough of them at both ends of their journeys.

There are a few scattered records of House Finches in The Bronx and in the Inwood section of Manhattan, probably of transient rather than breeding birds.

The species is well established along the Sound shore of Westchester. But there (as in Connecticut) the distribution is patchy. Most colonies are between the New England Thruway and Long Island Sound. Recently, however, there have been increasing numbers of records from central Westchester.

Those of us with special interest in the House Finch are now eager to see how far it will spread to the north and west. The most northerly breeding colony of which I have any record is already eight years old. William Wheeler had three House Finches feeding with Purple Finches at the Trailside Museum in Ward-Pound Ridge Reservation in January, 1954. Evidently they bred there that year, as birds were seen in the reservation all summer, although no nests were found. The species has been present there in every subsequent year, both summer and winter, but with no marked increase in numbers.

The most northerly occurrences of the House Finch (but so far without evidence of nesting) appear to be on the Westchester-Putnam border at Oregon Corners, where Paul J. Wolf has had small numbers at his feeders on several occasions since March 27, 1960.

West of the Hudson River there are several breeding colonies and many records of transients in New Jersey. The extension of the House Finch's range appears to be generally in a southwesterly direction away from New York. The first proved record for Rockland County is of a female at New City in 1960, followed by the report of a pair in South Nyack.

The severity of the winters in the Hudson Valley, and still more so in the adjacent highlands, makes it unlikely that the House Finch can extend its range much farther northward or westward unless it develops a migration pattern. That this is possible is indicated by the banding and trapping records of two-way travel between the New York and Philadelphia metropolitan areas. Since the birds disperse (we do not yet know how far) from

their breeding areas in August and September, observers should be especially alert for them then.

The House Finch has already surprised many ornithologists, notably Roger Peterson, by establishing itself at all in the East. It may yet surprise us still more, by further extending its range and giving the House Sparrow more competition. For those who would like to help it: the House Finch loves sunflower seed.

716 Guion Drive, Mamaroneck, N. Y.

FIFTEENTH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE FEDERATION OF NEW YORK STATE BIRD CLUBS, INC.

Albany, May 11 - 13, 1962

The fifteenth annual meeting of the council of the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs, Inc. was held in the Inn Towne Motor Hotel in Albany on May 12, 1962. Mr. John J. Elliott, President, called the meeting to order at 9:27 A. M. 31 delegates representing 22 clubs answered the roll call.

The minutes of the 1961 council meeting were read and approved.

Mrs. Dayton Stoner, Treasurer, read her report for the year 1961, which is summarized as follows:

Balance in General Fund Jan. 1, 1961	\$ 606.69
Receipts—Dues, interest on Savings Account, etc. --	1,885.53
	\$2,492.22
Expenses—Kingbird, etc.	\$2,308.72
Balance in General Fund Dec. 31, 1961	183.50
Balance in savings account Jan. 1, 1961	\$ 900.00
Receipts during 1961	
Bequest — John P. Bruck	1,000.00
Life membership installments	75.00
Balance in savings account Dec. 31, 1961	\$1,975.00

Mrs. Stoner also presented an interim report for the period from Jan. 1, 1962 to May, 1962, showing a present general fund balance of \$1,323.21 and \$2,050.00 in the savings account. The reports were accepted.

Mrs. Stoner presented the expense budget for the year 1963 indicating total expenditures of \$2,360. This budget was approved.

Mrs. Stoner read a report that she had received to date a fund of \$160.00 contributed by Schenectady Bird Club members and friends and to be known as "The Nelle G. VanVorst Memorial Fund". This will be placed in the savings account.

It was voted to extend our thanks to the executors of the Estate of John P. Bruck for the generous gift of \$1,000.00.