

ATTEMPTED NESTING OF THE WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILL IN NEW YORK STATE

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The White-winged Crossbill (*Loxia leucoptera*) follows cone crops around the boreal forests throughout the year, irrupting southward in certain winters. After appearance of Merriam's articles on the birds of Lewis County in 1878-79, the White-winged Crossbill was thought to breed in New York State. Eaton (1914) said, "It breeds in the Adirondack forest according to Merriam, but it is very much less common in the summer than the Red crossbill." The A.O.U. *Check-list* (1957) cites breeding in northeastern New York (eastern Lewis County, Long Lake), as does Bent (1968). After reviewing the literature and searching museum collections, Bull (1974) observes, "Although the White-winged Crossbill very likely has bred in the Adirondacks, I have been unable to find a single positive breeding record for New York State . . ." Bull closes his species account with the hope that, "Perhaps some day a sharp-eyed observer will discover a nest hidden away among the thick foliage of an evergreen, or find adults in the act of feeding young birds."

Thus began the almost quixotic search by members of the High Peaks Audubon Society. We would be looking for the concealed nest of a seemingly erratic species somewhere within the confines of the six-million acre Adirondack Park. The 1974 Elizabethtown Christmas Bird Count located a single individual, offering hope that more White-winged Crossbills might appear later that winter, drawn by the bumper crop of cones in the High Peaks region. The quest centered at Chubb River Swamp, an area Bull lists as one of the 15 outstanding birding areas in New York State, and where Geoffrey Carleton had made one of the seven summer sightings. The Chubb River Swamp also had a massive crop of spruce cones.

Trips to the Chubb River area in early January, 1975, were discouraging, but finally on January 20, Thomas Barber and I found ourselves surrounded by about twenty singing males. As rival males continued to sing and apparently establish territories during the following month, we continued to search the spruce-tamarack forest, pausing occasionally to lift branches or binoculars or cassette recorders.

On February 22, 1975, a party of five people was standing along the trail bordering the Chubb River, about a quarter-mile from the



Nest area—White-winged Crossbill
Chubb River, North Elba, Essex Co., N.Y.
Photograph by John M. C. Peterson

Averyville Road. The members were Deborah Anson, Pat Casselman, William Casselman, Patricia Taber, and the author. A cassette recording of the White-winged Crossbill song brought an instant reply from a male atop a nearby spruce. Bill Casselman aimed a parabolic microphone and began recording the long, rolling song of the male bird, and, as we silently watched, a female White-winged Crossbill made her way out along a spruce bough approximately 25 feet above the trail. Her crossed beak was filled with a clump of *usnea* lichen. She disappeared into the thick end of the snow-covered branch, perhaps five feet from the trunk, reappearing a moment later, her bill empty. Between 1:30 p.m. and 3:30 p.m., the male continued singing and the female continued nest-building. The first known New York State nesting attempt of the White-winged Crossbill was confirmed. Other competent observers were able to share and substantiate our observation the following day.

On subsequent visits in March we noted that the nest was complete and that males continued singing in the vicinity, but no further activity was detected. The nest itself was located deep within a thick black spruce bough which extended over the trail, and the principal

material of the rounded nest appeared to be *usnea* lichen. The size, shape, and material somewhat suggested the nest of the Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) with its mossy appearance. The nest could best be viewed from below with the low winter sun directly behind it, while from above the nest was wholly concealed, as determined by excursions up several of neighboring, swaying spruces.

A late snowstorm hit Essex County April 3-5, and although on a visit to the area on April 12 we again found singing males, the nesting bough was covered with heavy snow and ice. A nearby nest of the Pine Siskin (*Spinus pinus*), which was being constructed in a spruce branch about 30 feet above the trail on March 29, seen by Philip Warren, was also buried by the storm. White-winged Crossbills continued to frequent the Chubb River area, however, and successful nesting probably did occur somewhere within the vicinity. The last brief song was heard there May 17, 1975.

The White-winged Crossbill has undoubtedly bred in the Adirondacks of New York State wherever and whenever sufficient cones appeared, long before Merriam's first note. Credit for this confirmation belongs not only to the neophyte birders and aspiring listers who actually took part, but also to the many ornithologists whose published accounts gave direction to the search. That we were successful in locating a single nest in an immensity of wilderness seems almost a perfect blending of ornithology and poetry, especially if one is willing to accept the dictum that "Poetry is paying attention."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John M. C. Peterson is the president of the High Peaks Audubon Society, editor of its newsletter, member of the Executive Committee of the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs, a trustee of the Adirondack Conservancy, and a member of the Adirondack Council. He graduated from Hobart College in 1964 with a B.A. in English. After a checkered commercial career, he settled down in a house in the woods, south of the hamlet of Essex and in sight of Lake Champlain. From this vantage point, he now occupies a position created by Thoreau, of "self-appointed inspector of snowstorms, rainstorms, and surveyor of forest paths." In the above pursuits, he is ably assisted by his dog Max.