

## NESTING OF THE RED CROSSBILL ON LONG ISLAND

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The discovery of four nesting attempts by the Red Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra*) on Long Island in 1982 prompted a review of earlier records. Although the species typically breeds in boreal forest, it is noted for its erratic movements, changes in breeding areas, and sporadic winter incursions southward. Some of these movements have been followed by nesting attempts south of the normal breeding range. As given by the A.O.U. Check-list (American Ornithologists' Union, 1957) this includes the region south to central Ontario, southern Quebec and Newfoundland and in the mountains to Tennessee and North Carolina.

Griscom (1923), Cruickshank (1942) and Bull (1964) all reported an 1883 nesting at Miller Place, Long Island, discovered by Arthur Helme. The two latter authors also mention an 1875 record from Riverdale, Bronx County, the only known breeding record in the southeastern part of the state outside of Long Island. Breeding in the central and southern New Jersey pine barrens has also been documented (Bull, 1964).

During the fall and winter of 1963-64, a large flight of Red Crossbills reached Long Island and other parts of the east coast. Carleton (1964) reported "after their tremendous fall flight, Red Crossbills remained plentiful on Long Island in the early winter." The editors of the Northeastern Maritime Region and the Middle Atlantic Coast Region in the same issue of *Audubon Field Notes* also reported a massive flight.

On 2 April 1964, Dennis Puleston and the writer observed a pair of Red Crossbills building a nest on a horizontal limb of a Pitch Pine (*Pinus rigida*) about 35 feet above the ground along the headwaters of the Peconic River near the eastern edge of Brookhaven National Laboratory (BNL), Upton, Suffolk County. The female was observed breaking off dead twigs and carrying at least ten to the nest in a 10-to-15 minute period of observation. Two additional Red Crossbills were seen farther along the river and another pair observed about a mile west on the same date. On 7 April, the nest site was found abandoned, with no sign of the nest. This record was reported by Bull (1970) as near Yaphank.

That same season, a nest was found on the Radio Corporation of America property, in typical Pitch Pine woods, south of Riverhead

by Lee Taylor. Both adults were seen at the nest and several presumed flying young were seen in the vicinity later. The exact dates were not recorded and this record has not previously been published. On 30 May 1964, the late LeRoy Wilcox observed a singing male at Hunter's Garden, about four miles southwest of Riverhead. This area is also dominated by Pitch Pine growing on morainal hills. Thus, the large 1963-64 flight was followed by two known nesting attempts and possibly more. However, late northbound migrants are not uncommon in May and Bull (1964) apparently rejected a number of supposed breeding records based only on birds present on late dates.

According to Bull (1976), Red Crossbills were observed at Connetquot State Park (formerly Southside Sportsmen's Club) in Oakdale during the summers of 1972-76 but no evidence of breeding was obtained.

On 10 April 1982, David Houle found a pair of Red Crossbills building a nest at Connetquot State Park (block 6551C of the New York State Breeding Bird Atlas Project). The nest was located about 40 feet up on the southern side of a Pitch Pine. It appeared substantially complete but the female was tearing bits of wood fiber from a nearby dead deciduous tree and adding it and grass to the nest after which she turned around several times in the nest to shape the interior. Meanwhile, the male sang softly nearby.

This nest was apparently abandoned, but on 17 April another pair, distinguished by plumage differences, was found constructing a nest about half a mile away in a similar situation. This nest was also subsequently abandoned. Both males were judged to be first-year birds on the basis of their incomplete alternate plumage.

On 12 April 1982, Emil Schwarting found a pair building a nest about 30 feet up on a horizontal branch of a Pitch Pine in an extensive oak-pine woods on morainal hills in East Manorsville (block 6852A). The birds were observed by the writer still building on 14 April. Nesting materials were gathered by the female from on or near the ground as the male followed, and appeared to consist of grasses and plant fibers for the inner lining. The male as well as the female was observed shaping the nest which was obviously nearly complete. The nest was very difficult to observe as it was embedded in numerous very dense pine branchlets, and a clear view from the ground was blocked by other trees. However, Schwarting later observed the pair copulating and on 7 May saw both birds at the nest with the female incubating. On or about 20 May, he saw the male approach the nest and judged it to be feeding young but could not be certain because of the obstructions to vision.

On 15 June, the writer observed a male Red Crossbill perched on a branch of a Pitch Pine along a dirt road near the northwestern corner of BNL (block 6752A). As the male was being watched, first one, then two and finally four short-tailed juvenal Red Crossbills descended from the tree to bathe in a puddle in the road. They were followed by the male and after a lengthy bath, all flew up to the pine and into the woods beyond. A female was not seen. This area of the Laboratory property had not been visited previously during the breeding season but it is believed that nesting occurred nearby since the young could not have been out of the nest for more than a few days. Both this male and the one in East Manorville were also in incomplete alternate plumage and were judged to be first-year birds.

Only a few Red Crossbills were reported on Long Island during the past winter of 1981-1982, and only small numbers were reported in adjacent inland regions (Paxton *et al.*, 1982 and other regional editors). Thus this number of nesting attempts following a winter without a large flight seems unusual. However, flocks of from four to 50 birds were observed at Muttontown Preserve in northern Nassau County on 21 dates from 24 December to 20 May, in old estate plantings of mixed conifers (W. E. Paterson, pers. comm.). During the period from December to mid-March, birds occurred in mixed flocks of adult males and adult females plus birds in partial adult plumage. From mid-March to May, birds were mostly in pairs and small flocks. The paired birds appeared to be in full adult plumage and were secretive. No nesting activity was observed. Winter flocks such as these may have been the source of the breeding birds found farther east on Long Island, although substantial numbers (4-21 birds) were still present at Muttontown after the dates on which nest building was observed at Connetquot and Manorville.

It appears that all of the nesting attempts were made by first-year males that had not utilized a previous breeding area and which stopped in favorable habitat on the northward migration or after wandering from a wintering area. The fully adult birds may have moved northward to their normal range. Thus, a large winter flight is not a prerequisite for nesting attempts south of the normal range, although some southward movement is obviously necessary.

In summary, it appears that the Red Crossbill should be considered a sporadic breeding species on Long Island, usually but not always in years following large winter flights, and that first-year birds are most likely to attempt nesting south of the normal range. It is likely that many more nesting attempts have occurred in the past since the oak-

pine woods and Pitch Pine barrens were seldom visited by birders during the breeding season prior to the New York State Breeding Bird Atlas project.

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