

NESTING FINCHES IN THE HIGHLANDS OF SOUTHERN ONONDAGA AND MADISON COUNTIES

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Having heard of large numbers of Red and White-winged Crossbills and Pine Siskins in the Adirondacks and the high, forested country to the south and east, several local observers and I decided to check similar habitat in southern Onondaga and Madison Counties. This coverage was done for the New York State Breeding Bird Atlas. From 18 February to 17 April, I made nine trips into this area. I worked in 13 blocks. Chad Covey and Gerald Church supplied records for two blocks that I did not visit. Other blocks within this area did not contain the right habitat for these finches.

Most of this area is 1300 to 1700 feet in elevation and was reforested in the late 1930s. It is approximately 40 miles east to west and 12 miles north to south in extent. There are stands of mixed hardwoods, larch, red and white pine, and white and Norway spruce. The white pines had almost no cones, and red pines had only a few. Both spruces had abundant cones. Birds mainly used white and Norway spruces, and some larch, during the winter.

During this period, small groups of Purple Finch and Evening Grosbeak were utilizing the abundant food throughout the area. Although I saw numerous flight displays by Purple Finch, I saw no evidence of nesting for either species. A few crossbills and siskins were reported away from the Adirondacks in other parts of the Oneida Lake Basin Region outside of this reforested section. These were all singles and there was no evidence of nesting. I visited an extensive area north of Oneida Lake in Oswego County, checking small evergreen plantations that had good cone crops. There were only scattered finches here.

Pine Siskins were found in 13 of the 15 blocks checked. At first, the siskins were in large flocks, flying around and utilizing the abundant food available. However, a few had paired. On 19 February I watched one pair building a nest. They were still breaking off small dead twigs to complete the outer part of the nest. I believe this nest subsequently was destroyed by a heavy, wet snowstorm. I could not see the nest in the snow and the pair abandoned the area. It was not until 17 April that I saw young Pine Siskins being fed in this block. By 1 March there were few flocks of siskins left. Most siskins were paired and in active courtship. Where one bird of a pair flew, the other followed. If one bird landed in the road to get food or water, the other landed close by. If the male was singing in a tree, the female was feeding in the

same tree. There were many short chases of rivals or prospective mates. Occasionally males performed a high, circular song-flight. I saw copulation only once, in a low bush near some evergreens. I saw nest building twice.

Although I am certain there were many successful nestings, I saw two young birds actually being fed only once. No matter how many times I observed these birds alone or in small groups, I was never certain whether I was watching a male, a female or a young bird. When I watched an obvious pair, one individual always seemed brighter colored. I assumed that it was the male.

I found White-winged Crossbills in nine blocks. A small section of one block that was almost entirely planted to white spruce was favored by this species. I found one pair of Red Crossbills at the very end of this particular road where the trees ended. White-winged Crossbill males were perched on various treetops along the road. There was almost constant chasing or territorial singing. Once active nesting started, their territories became less defined and birds frequently formed small flocks. These groups became very defensive when I imitated a Screech-Owl or did any "squeaking" on the back of my hand. The females became very secretive at this time. I am sure there was considerable nesting success in this strip of woods. However, I never saw young being fed in or found a nest in this part of the block.

White-winged Crossbills presented similar problems for aging and sexing as did Pine Siskins. Males were easy to separate by their red or orange coloring, but females were streaked on the breast like fledglings. Sometimes I saw small family groups in trees, but could not be sure which birds were the fledglings. I was only sure in one case. A group of three adult males and four streaked birds was found feeding in a road. One streaked bird was shivering and fluttering its wings. Its mandibles were not crossed. One of the adult males walked over and fed this individual.

Red Crossbills were located in ten blocks and nesting was confirmed in three. They were greatly outnumbered by White-winged Crossbills, but seemed more obvious and easy to locate. They often fed on dirt or dirt-shouldered roads in pairs or in groups, more so than did White-winged Crossbills. Since this feeding or gathering of salt and grit from roads seemed to be important to the birds, it was easy to locate flocks. I walked back into the woods on snowshoes but found no birds there. I think that the majority of them fed or nested near these roads. I occasionally saw flocks of both crossbill species, but I never saw siskins in a mixed flock. They often fed in the same trees but remained apart.

Courtship behavior of Red Crossbills was similar to that of White-

winged Crossbills. However, I did not find females as difficult to locate once nesting began. I often watched females gather nesting materials, ignoring my presence. Since there were fewer pairs, singing males were some distance apart. They frequently chased other males or females, and performed spiraling song-flights during early courtship.

Male, female and immature Red Crossbills were easy to distinguish by color. None of the adult birds had streaks on the breast. Fledglings were easy to pick out because they are heavily streaked. I saw several sets of fledglings being fed.

By mid-April the birds began to disperse. It became more difficult to find any in areas which had held large numbers throughout the late winter months. My home is 20 miles from the closest known nesting area. On 1 May a flock of 45 White-winged Crossbills appeared in an evergreen plantation in back of my house. Several of them looked like young birds. On 17 May a pair and two young Red Crossbills were in my yard. However, almost none were seen or heard migrating over Derby Hill along Lake Ontario, a route commonly used by migratory species. Probably these birds migrate from food source to food source rather than follow a regular route.

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