

WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILL BREEDING IN CHENANGO-CORTLAND-MADISON COUNTIES 1989-90

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White-winged Crossbill was present in the Chenango-Cortland County area at this writing (March 1990). Breeding was confirmed in this area in the winter of 1984-85 and breeding is again taking place. Abundant cone crops in N.Y. State plantations of Norway Spruce, White Spruce, European Larch and hemlock are apparently the critical factor in holding the crossbills in this region and in triggering breeding behavior.

The cone crops formed largely in the spring of 1989. White-winged Crossbill was first noted by this observer in August of that year. At that time males in mature plumage were seen along the edges of dirt roads. Because salt is used only in minute quantities by towns on rural roads and salt is not used at all in summer, I suspect that these birds could have been getting grit or possibly pulling grass for nest material as in 1984-85. Immediately after the first sighting, I returned to the area and played taped White-winged and Red Crossbill calls. Male White-winged Crossbill responded by taking perches on spruce tree tops and singing their characteristic trill. This behavior is characteristic in White-winged Crossbill during courtship and early nesting. No females were seen at this time and I concluded that either males had arrived before the females or that females were already on nests.

Several weeks later taped calls elicited no response and I thought that either crossbills were no longer present or nesting was advanced to a stage when they no longer respond to calls. Through the fall and winter of 1989 reports of White-winged Crossbill came in from other parts of Chenango County. White-winged Crossbill was present in spruce plantations in adjacent Madison County as well (*Kingbird* 40(2):108; 1990). In March 1990 White-winged Crossbills were heard, apparently on nests, in the spruce "jip jipping" in the Otselic area and in the Taylor Valley-Chenango Swamp area of Cortland County. On 17 March recently fledged White-winged Crossbill were seen at the Cortland location with flocking adults.

In contrast to most spruce plantations in central New York, some plantations in the Taylor-Chenango area are at low elevation on the valley floor. White-winged Crossbill breed on ridge tops at elevations of 1800-2000 feet in the Otselic area while in the Taylor-Chenango area the elevation at which White-winged Crossbill breeds is about 1100-1200 feet.

In addition to White-winged Crossbill, Pine Siskin was also present in large numbers and breeding. Red Crossbill, however, was absent. This differs from the invasion of 1984-85 when all three species were here in great numbers and breeding. Several other differences also stand out. In 1984-85 Pine Siskin did not visit feeders but in 1989-90 Pine Siskin visited feeders in large numbers. In 1984-85 Red and White-winged Crossbills were seen on paved roads, apparently licking road salt. White-winged Crossbill haven't been seen on paved roads and I know of no road kills. Although this area had one abundant cone crop since 1984-85 and before the present winter's cone crop, White-winged Crossbill had been absent until now. Based on collected specimens and sightings, I believe that White-winged Crossbills have been using and probably breeding in the Chenango-Cortland-Madison area since the 1940s. Cornell University has specimens of White-winged Crossbill collected in Chenango as early 1947 and 1951, which would coincide well with spruce plantations in this area reaching cone-bearing age. Sightings since then have been regular. It is my belief that the breeding of White-winged Crossbill in central New York is not unusual but is a regular occurrence, because the spruce plantations provide an important alternate breeding area for White-winged Crossbill when its regular boreal food sources fail.

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