



Figure 1 – Hildreth Feeder ©Jody Hildreth

REDPOLLS IN CENTRAL NEW YORK WINTER 2003 - 2004

Jody Hildreth

120 Osborne Avenue, Waterville, NY 12480
falcon@kidwings.com

The Common Redpoll (*Carduelis flammea*) can be found most winters in New York State. Some years, this species is abundant, with individual flocks numbering in the hundreds, sometimes into the thousands!! The winter of 2003-04 was such a year. In contrast, the Hoary Redpoll (*C. hornemanni*) is a very rare winter visitant with numbers usually in single digits (Levine 1998).

The Hoary Redpoll is on the review list of birds to be reported to NYSARC if seen anywhere in the state, and is divided into two subspecies: *hornemanni* and *exilipes*. All accepted records of Hoary Redpoll in NYS accrue to the subspecies *exilipes*.

According to NYSARC records there have been five winters since 1981 when Hoary Redpolls have been reported. Keep in mind these are only reports that were submitted to NYSARC, which means there were undoubtedly more sightings than what this data reflects:

1981/82	12 accepted records
1993/94	7 accepted records
1995/96	5 accepted records
1997/98	10 accepted records
1999/2000	10 accepted records

At least 8 documented Hoary Redpolls were seen at my feeders in Waterville, NY between January and March of 2004. Hoary Redpolls were also reported widely throughout New York State with at least 32 individuals being reported on several birding listservs. It will be interesting to see how many of these get reported to NYSARC.

Attracting Redpolls

The first Common Redpoll made a solo appearance on 18 Dec 2003. Each week more redpolls were added, peaking in early February when we had over 1000 finches at our feeders with seventy-five percent of them being redpolls and the rest mostly American Goldfinches. Numbers were estimated by printing a large digital picture of the flock and then crossing individual birds off with a magic marker. We have been feeding birds for ten years now and we have never come close to having a flock this size before.

So why did they come to our feeders? One answer might be our location. We are on the edge of a small town with a large state forest about a mile away from us. There are many open farm fields all around us as well. In November I built a crude bird feeder out of some lumber left over from a home renovation project. It consisted of a 2 ft. by 3ft. platform tray, a roof over the tray, two

hanging tube feeders above this roof, and two suet feeders hanging off each side of the tube feeders. Although not as aesthetically pleasing as are most store bought feeders, this homemade model served its purpose well. Except for the suet, the feeders were filled exclusively with black-oil sunflower seeds.

Obviously, one thousand birds could not feed effectively from a feeder this size. I had two strategies for attracting large numbers of birds to our yard; scattering seed and keeping the ground clear. Each morning after filling the feeder I would scatter seeds in a ten foot circle (Fig. 1). Anytime we received a significant snowfall I would snowblow a path to the feeders as well as clear the area where I scattered seed. This created a hard ground surface for the seed. Otherwise, seed falling on freshly fallen snow disappears and becomes difficult for birds to find and eat easily. The snowblowing also served another purpose. It helped throw the scattered seed in a larger area, including a small woodlot near the feeder. This created even more surface area where the redpolls could feed. During February I was putting out an average of five gallons of seed each day. By the end of the winter the birds had gone through 500 pounds of sunflower seed.

Redpoll Behavior at the Feeders

Anyone who has observed a flock of redpolls knows that they are quite energetic and at the feeders they are constantly in motion. They would start gathering in the tops of tall trees in a small woodlot adjacent to our house. Gradually they would move lower into the lilac branches that were just a few feet from the feeders. Finally, following the lead of one seemingly brave bird, they would descend onto the feeders and ground looking like large drops of water dripping from the branches. Once on the ground the redpolls made small but frequent movements as they sorted through the seeds. The flock would feed in this incessant manner until something startled them: a car driving by the house, our furnace kicking on, or a Mourning Dove landing at the feeders. The startled flock would find quick cover in a small woodlot only to return to the feeders within a few minutes. This pattern of feeding would continue throughout the day only to be broken by a hunting accipiter. The numbers would peak in the morning then gradually decrease as the day went on. The last few redpolls would make their final appearance with about two hours of sunlight left.

Other sources mention that Hoary Redpolls display aggressive behavior towards Common Redpolls (Czaplak 1995). I did not observe this at our feeders. In fact, I observed the Common Redpolls being more aggressive. On one occasion, a male Common Redpoll landed near a feeding male House Finch. The House Finch had an entire sunflower seed in its bill which caught the eye of the Common Redpoll. A mini tug of war ensued which lasted for about 15 seconds with the Common Redpoll winning.

Redpolls are also vocal while feeding. However this cannot be realized while watching in warmth from behind windows. One day I sat in a chair on the edge of the scattered seed. Redpolls came within a foot of me as the flock gave soft *tip* notes in complete surround sound. When the flock was startled and flew to the safety of the tall trees they would often give a wiry ascending *tweweee*.

Separating Hoary from Common Redpoll

On 7 Jan 2004 I noticed one bird that looked 'different' than the others. I have always been skeptical of Hoary Redpoll sightings because most sightings were backed up with few details except to note an overall frosted appearance. The bird I was looking at certainly did look much whiter than any I had ever seen before, but I had my doubts.

Fortunately I had been practicing digiscoping and immediately got my camera set up (Nikon Coolpix 995 and a Pentax PF80). Through our windows I managed to get some poor quality pictures which I posted to the Oneidabirds listserv and asked for people's opinions.. Everyone who responded was in agreement that the bird was indeed a Hoary Redpoll. Over the next several weeks, in the company of other birders, I had the opportunity to study Hoary Redpolls many times.

What are the best ways to identify the Hoary Redpoll in a flock of constantly moving redpolls? The first key is to find a bird that is much paler/whiter than any other redpoll. This alone does not indicate that you have a Hoary Redpoll. It merely indicates that you may be on the right path. Next you need to note a few key field marks, and hope the bird cooperates during this process. After personal observations and discussions with other New York birders, I believe the two crucial field marks are the bill structure and the lack of streaking on the undertail coverts. The bill structure, for many birders, is considered the most important field mark since a species' skeletal structure has less variation than its plumage. In comparison with Common Redpoll, Hoary Redpoll's bill is shorter and has a pushed in look. The undertail coverts of a Hoary Redpoll should be unstreaked, but some sources say there can be overlap with a single streak. (Sibley 2000, Czaplak 1995)

Other field marks that should help support the identification:

- Flank streaking – greatly reduced in length and number in Hoary
- Rump – should be unstreaked in Hoary
- Breast – In Hoary ,a pale frosted pink in males, white in females
- Cream color in face – more pronounced than in Common

Identifying a Hoary Redpoll positively can be excruciatingly difficult. If you believe you have discovered a Hoary Redpoll, get pictures of it regardless of the quality. Then ask other birders for their impression of the bird. As I have discovered, other birders may notice field marks that at first went unnoticed.

Variation in a Flock

At one time our flock of redpolls swelled to over 700 birds. With a flock this large it did not take long to realize there is a myriad of variation between individual redpolls. Before discussing variations between Common Redpolls, it is important to understand the molting cycle of the redpoll. Redpolls molt once a year, at the end of the breeding season. As the winter months pass, the edges of the feathers wear away causing birds to appear darker and males to reveal more

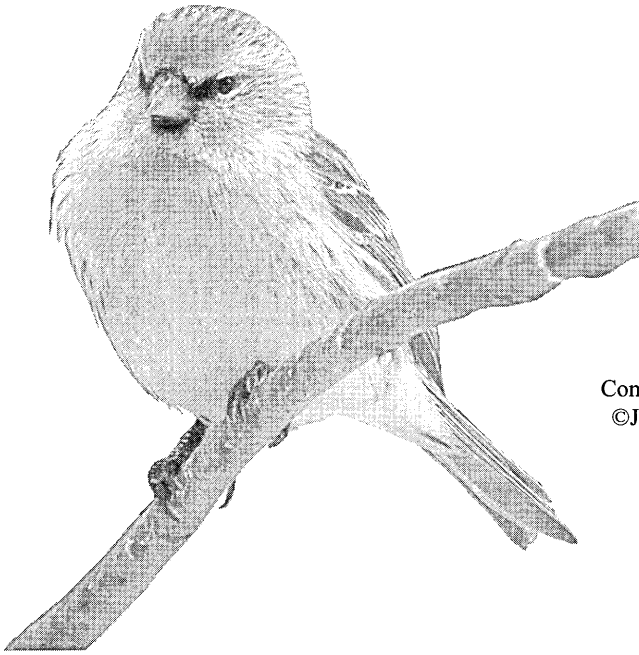


Figure 2
Common Redpoll
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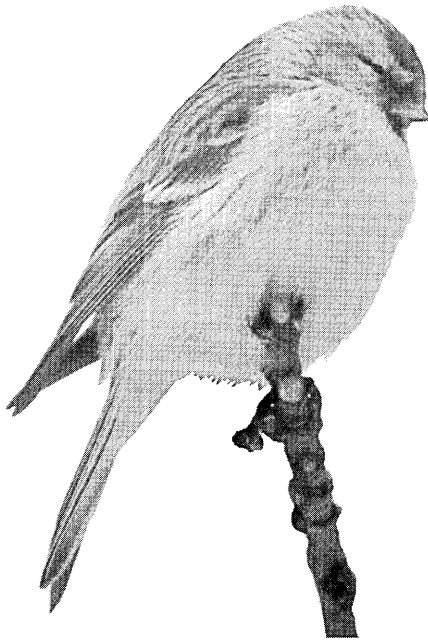


Figure 3
Hoary Redpoll
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pink in the breast.(Czaplak 1995) Compounding the problem of feather wear is the fact that a typical flock of Common Redpolls contains four types of birds: adult male, adult female, juvenile male, and juvenile female.

A large flock of Common Redpolls in New York has the potential of containing Hoary Redpolls. A problem with identification is that juvenile Hoaries can look similar to Commons. In my observations, I saw several dark birds that had a strongly pushed in bill. However, it was nearly impossible to study these birds further as they were active and impossible to relocate since they showed no other obvious field marks that would distinguish them from the other birds in the flock. I do believe there were juvenile Hoary Redpolls in the flock of birds that visited our yard, but it is impossible to verify without good photographic documentation.

Many birders who visited our feeders were amazed at the variation in the redpolls. Several birds were studied closely since they showed some characteristics of Hoary Redpoll, but did not exhibit enough field marks to make a positive identification. For example, (Fig.2) is of a Common Redpoll. While the bird exhibits greatly reduced flank streaking and clean undertail coverts, the bill is too large and the red in the breast too pronounced.

Number of Hoary Redpolls in Waterville

After close study and many photographs, I have identified eight different Hoary Redpolls at our feeder this winter. The first two were females with greatly reduced flank streaking (Fig.3). These two looked so identical that had I not seen both of them at the same moment I would have believed there was only one. Accompanying these were two males, each of which showed extremely pale pink in the breast, but different amounts of streak flanking making it possible to distinguish between the two. I photographed another bird that at first I thought was a female which later turned out to be a male that was just beginning to acquire a pale pink wash on its breast These five birds disappeared when the snow melted in late February, but a new group appeared in mid-March. The first was a female easily identified by an unusual cap: only a quarter of it was red while the rest was a dark brown. Finally, on 25 Mar two extremely white individuals made a one-day appearance.

Fig. 4 shows a comparison of the two species highlighting obvious specific differences in optimum individuals.

What's More Fun: Watching the Birds or the Birders?

It was a joy to have the constant motion of redpolls outside our family room window this winter, but even more so was the joy of hosting so many birders from around the state and as far away as Maryland. It gave me a chance to put a face to so many names I only read in e-mails, listen to so many birding tales, and the opportunity to compare field marks in a live setting. Birding is always more enjoyable when you share it with someone else.

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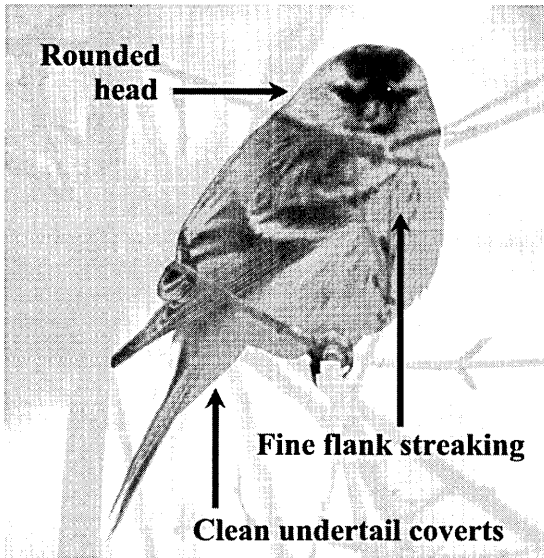


Figure 4
Hoary Redpoll
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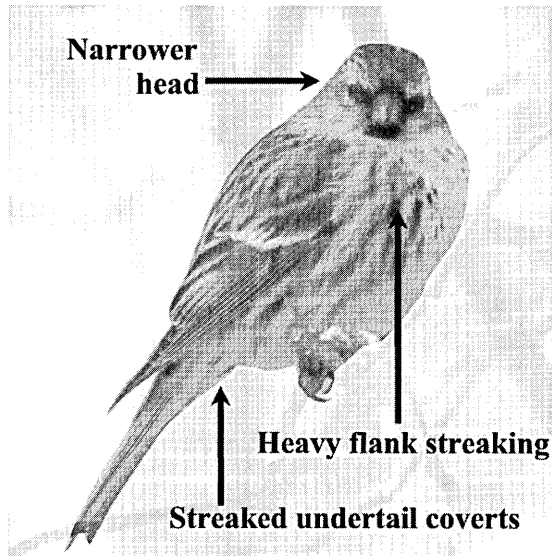


Figure 4
Common Redpoll
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