

Combination of factors results in influx of northern finches

- By Wayne N. Laubscher

The winter of the finches is upon us.

A combination of factors has resulted in an influx, or irruption, of several species of northern finches looking for food into the northeast.

Fair-to-poor conifer cone and white birch crops along the eastern Great Lakes, along with spruce budworm outbreaks in Canada have caused good flights of Purple Finches, Pine Siskins and Evening Grosbeaks. In addition, smaller movements of Common Redpolls, Red Crossbills, a few White-winged Crossbills and Red-breasted Nuthatches are occurring. Nuthatches are not finches, but are often associated with these flights. This was first noticed around late August.

Purple Finches nest in Pennsylvania, and will regularly appear at bird feeders. Spruce budworm outbreaks were a beneficial factor in this finch's breeding success this past year. Adult males appear washed in showy raspberry red, while the females have a strong brown face pattern and streaking on the body. Pine Siskins are occasional state nesters. They are brown, usually with heavy streaking, and a bit of yellow in the tail and wings. They prefer feeders with nyger seed.

Although there was a small irruption of Evening Grosbeaks during the winter of 2018-19, this winter's influx is the largest in at least three decades. As with Purple Finches, outbreaks of the conifer pest — the spruce budworm — have influenced increased breeding of this large, showy finch and flights east and south into the northeastern United States. The males are gold and black with white wing patches, and the females are gray and black also with white wing patches. They voraciously consume large quantities of black oil sunflower seeds. Their flocks are quite noisy.

Common Redpolls are small arctic finches. They may be found in birch trees, weedy fields and at feeders offering black oil sunflower and nyger seeds. Both sexes have red caps and black chins. Males also sport a pink wash on the breast. A closely-related species, the Hoary Redpoll, may be a rare sight with Common Redpolls. Hoary Redpolls are a much paler, frostier looking bird often not reliably identified.

The aptly named crossbills — both Red and White-winged — feed on a variety of conifer crops. The upper and lower mandibles of their bills cross, appearing deformed, but actually are highly specialized for extracting seeds from cones. Male Red Crossbills are a dull red, and females are dull yellow. Male White-wingeds are primarily rose-red, and females are dull yellow with streaking. Both have white wing bars on black wings.

Red-breasted Nuthatches prefer conifer stands. They are generally quiet and usually rather tame. Sporting a black eye stripe with a white eyebrow, they are bluish-gray on the back with a buffy orange underside. Their call has been described as sounding like a tiny tin horn.

All these species are currently being reported in varying numbers across our region. Fill your bird feeders and enjoy the show this winter. It's a rare occurrence. They are certain to be a welcome distraction, and will brighten your day.