

The Winter Finches Are Back!

By Wayne N. Laubscher

Bird watchers, especially those who regularly feed birds, may recall the winter finch irruption that I wrote about two years ago. Well, get ready for the return of several northern winter finches again this fall and winter. Tyler Hoar of the Finch Research Network forecasted a major finch irruption which includes the northeastern U.S. and, in fact, this is currently happening.

There are good cone and berry crops along the northeastern Atlantic coast. However, inland to the western Great Lakes these crops are generally poor to average. This will affect movements of Evening Grosbeaks, Purple Finches, Pine Siskins, and Red Crossbills. Birch and alder crops, the main food source for Redpolls, are poor to average and these birds will be on the move. Outbreaks of spruce budworm were beneficial for the breeding this past year of Evening Grosbeaks and Purple Finches.

Since several weeks ago, all of the following species are being reported, with Evening Grosbeaks, that big noisy showy finch, being the most widespread in Pennsylvania in many years. They're being seen in nearly every county. Males are gold and black with white wing patches and the females are gray and black also with white wing patches. They feed very heavily on black sunflower seed.

Purple Finches nest in Pennsylvania and show up at bird feeders. Adult males appear washed in red raspberry. Females have a strong brown face pattern and body streaking. They prefer nyger seed. Pine Siskins sometimes nest in Pennsylvania. They are brown, usually with heavy streaking and some yellow in the tail and wings. They also prefer nyger seed.

Common Redpolls, and the rarer Hoary Redpoll, are small arctic finches. They can be found in birch trees, weedy fields, and at feeders with black oil sunflower and nyger seeds. Both sexes have red caps and black chins. Males also have a pink wash on the breast. Related Hoary Redpolls are paler and frostier in appearance compared to Commons. A reliable identification of them can be difficult.

Crossbills feed on a variety of conifer crops. The upper and lower mandibles of their bills cross. They appear deformed but actually are specialized for extracting seeds from cones. Male Red Crossbills are a dull red, females are dull yellow. Male White winged Crossbills are primarily rose-red and females are dull yellow with streaking.

Both sexes have white wing bars. Of the two species, the Red Crossbill will be the more likely one to be seen.

Last, two non finches are irrupting in the state and are included in the forecast. One is the familiar Blue Jay. This will be a big winter for them. There ought to be many around. The other is the somewhat tame Red-breasted Nuthatch. They're found in conifer stands. They have a black eye stripe with a white eyebrow and are bluish gray on the back with an orange underside. Their call sounds like a tiny tin horn.

So, stock up on your birdseed and enjoy the winter show!

All photos are by the Author

