

WINTER FINCHES

We have lots of birds that we see only in spring and summer, but there are some that we can enjoy only in winter.



Pine Siskin

Pine Siskins and Common Redpolls are tiny finches that come to our area exclusively during the cold winter months. However, they're not reliable migrants. Nomadic and wandering best describes their journeys. Some years we'll see sizable flocks at our feeders. Other years they can be completely absent.

Invasions of Pine Siskins occur more often than irruptions of Redpolls. We usually expect to see Pine Siskins most winters, but the last couple of years they've been pretty scarce. We've had some early sightings this year, so hopefully the flocks will visit us.

Pine Siskins are finches, but these streaky brown birds can be overlooked and dismissed as "sparrows" without more careful observation. These guys are little. They average just five inches long and half an ounce in weight. Unlike most finches that have sturdy bills, Pine Siskins have slender, sharply pointed bills. This is an ideal adaptation for extracting pine seeds.

Their all over brown streaking is accented with yellow wing bars. Their short tails are notched and also have yellow markings. The yellow is highly variable from very pale, to quite bright. Males usually show the most and brightest yellow markings. In

both sexes, the yellow markings are much more noticeable in flight. You'll definitely see lots of yellow flashing when a flock is startled at your feeders.

Pine Siskins breed all across the northern U.S. border, southern Canada and south into the mountains in the western United States. During the winter, they wander south widely and erratically over all of the U.S. in search of food.

As their name suggests, Pine Siskins are partial to the seeds found in pine cones. But, they are highly adaptable and will find food in the weedy fields, scrubby thickets and of course at feeders in our yards. These acrobatic little birds will easily cling to any finch feeder that contains nyjer and/or sunflower hearts. Their bills don't allow them to crack larger seeds. They love our nyjer and hearts finch mix.

If you see one Pine Siskin, you'll undoubtedly see many more. They are very gregarious and forage in compact, sometimes quite large flocks. You may even hear them. They keep in contact with incessant wheezy twitters.

Pine Siskins often appear at our feeders with American Goldfinches. Although the Siskins are a bit smaller than the Goldfinches, they are feisty little birds and hold their own at any feeder. With a bit of luck, maybe this year we'll see lots of these cheerful wanderers.

There is nothing "common" in my book about Common Redpolls. We do not see them nearly as often as we do Pine Siskins. And when we do, they often don't appear until late winter.

Common Redpolls are about the same size and weight as Pine Siskins, but their bodies are more compact and look chunkier. When I see them, I'm reminded of cotton balls with beautiful markings. "Poll" means cap or hat and a Redpoll's most prominent feature is an almost ruby red spot on its forehead. Males also have a variable rosy wash across their breasts.



Common Redpoll

Redpolls have very small, yellow conical shaped bills. A black chin, black above the bill and dark eyes give these delightful birds a very distinctive face. Dull black to brown streaks cover their backs, wings and flanks. The streaks contrast with white breasts and stomachs, resembling a bird wearing a vest!

These little bundles of fluff look like they would be very delicate. Quite the opposite, they are extremely hardy. They breed and often stay all year in the very far north. They are at home on the tundra around the top of the world.

One of the Common Redpoll's amazing adaptations to the deep, deep cold is to burrow into the snow for insulation.

Major irruptions of Common Redpolls normally occur in our area every seven to ten years. It's not the cold that sends them south, it's food shortages. We live on the southern edge of their winter wanderings, which helps explain why they don't appear very often and may not be here until late January or even February. There's a lot of miles and area between us and their home.

Like the Pine Siskins, the Common Redpolls will readily come to our finch feeders, in chattering flocks.

Pine Siskins, Common Redpolls and American Goldfinches will often forage in loose mixed flocks. I'll take this opportunity to remind everyone that we do have Goldfinches all year round. In the winter, they've lost their bright yellow color and their black cap. Soft brown replaces the gold but they retain a muted black and white wing pattern.

So, keep your finch feeders out, clean and filled or you may miss some of our most fun winter birds.

Another note about Goldfinches. We've been feeding a new seed, Nutra-Saff at home and at the store for quite a while. Our results with it have been excellent, so we decided to offer it in our shop. The biggest surprise with Nutra-Saff is that the Goldfinches love it. I've never seen them eat regular safflower, so I am amazed at how fast they took to Nutra-Saff.

We do have another finch that we see only in colder weather. Unlike our wandering little finches, Purple Finches are true migrators. They are easily and often confused with House Finches, so I'll talk about both Purple and House Finches another time.

DECEMBER BIRD NOTES

As temperatures drop and stay below freezing, our birds will have a hard time finding open water. A heated birdbath or a heater for your existing bath will help them a lot and may attract non-feeder birds to your yard.

Suet will be relished by Woodpeckers, Nuthatches and many other birds.

Other "winter only" birds to watch for are Red-breasted Nuthatches, American Tree Sparrows and of course Dark-eyed Juncos.

Enjoy your birds!
Ellen S. Montgomery

As we go through the holiday season, we would like to wish all of our friends and customers Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

Ellen, Kelly, Paulette, Doris and Carol

