

## HOUSE FINCH

Ready for a history lesson? One of the most common year-round birds at our feeders is the House Finch. But it is really a newcomer to our area.

House Finches originally were residents of Western North America, ranging from British Columbia down through Mexico. So, how did they become residents of the Eastern U.S., including Iowa?

Back around 1940, unscrupulous dealers were catching House Finches in the West and selling them as pets in the New York City area. Called, "Hollywood Finches" the birds' pretty color and exuberant song made them attractive as caged birds in peoples' homes.

Except for one thing: it was highly illegal! Authorities learned of the illegal sales and were poised to make arrests. To avoid prosecution under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, "Hollywood Finch" vendors and owners released their House Finches. No birds, no evidence!

House Finches are very adaptable, successful birds. From these initial releases they began breeding and expanding their Eastern territory. And expand they did! The first House Finches were recorded in Iowa in 1982 and by about 1990, the Eastern population met the Western population covering the entire U.S. and Southern Canada.

If you have an older field guide, it may not show House Finches in our area. The birds moved faster than the field guide editors!

So now that you know how they got here, let's take a look at these amazing birds.

House Finches are medium sized finches, slightly larger than the American Goldfinch. Like most birds, the male has the bright colors. He is rosy red on his face, upper breast and rump. His back, belly and tail are streaky brown. His flanks are thickly streaked with brown.

### Male House Finch

Rosy red is the color most often seen on the male, but that color is highly variable. He can be pale yellow, orange or an orange red, depending on what he ate (or didn't eat) when his feathers were growing.

Female House Finches are an unremarkable greyish brown. They have thick, blurry streaks all over and a plain, unmarked face. They're easy to overlook, or dismiss as another "Sparrow".

### Female House Finch

House Finches are appropriately named. They favor urban and suburban areas and will nest close to houses. As the population increases, they have spread to more rural areas as well. I had sizable flocks of House Finches at my in-town feeders for quite a few years before they became common at my feeders in the country. These birds will flourish in a great variety of habitats where they will nest and raise three broods a year. And just about any nest site will do. They'll be happy with conifer trees, ivy on buildings, bird houses with large holes, or any hole large enough in a manmade structure. True to their "House" name, some of their favorite nesting sites are hanging flower baskets or decorative wreaths on our porches!

House Finches primarily eat seeds, so they are easily attracted to our bird feeders. While not as acrobatic as some smaller finches, they find little challenge using almost any type of feeder. When they aren't nesting, they are very gregarious and may form large flocks. You're likely to see more than just a few at your feeders.

We have found that their favorite seed, year-round, is Golden Safflower seed. Of course, they'll also eat black oil sunflower seed or nyjer seed, but given the choice they head for the Golden Safflower.

One adaptation of our Eastern House Finch population has been noticed in just the



last few years. They're becoming somewhat migratory. They're not traveling long distances, but some of the more northerly birds are withdrawing further south. The Western population hasn't developed this behavior.

I would be remiss if I didn't talk about "House Finch Eye Disease." This is a bacterial infection called conjunctivitis that causes the birds' eyes to mat over and swell shut. The infection itself is not deadly, and a few birds may survive, but a blind bird will starve or fall prey to predators.

Humans can't contract the disease, it's strictly a bird infection, the same one that affects domestic chickens and turkeys. When it was first observed on the East Coast in 1994, it was feared that it would spread to other wild birds. Fortunately, this didn't happen except in a few isolated cases.

It's not known how the disease spreads from one House Finch to another, but it spread rapidly. By 1997 it was infecting our House Finches in Iowa and all over the Eastern population. Now, it seems to have run its course and House Finch populations have rebounded. Cornell Lab stopped actively tracing the epidemic in 2008, but estimated that fifty percent of Eastern House Finches succumbed to the infection.

Happily, we have lots of House Finches again! One of my favorite things about these cheerful birds, is that they definitely out-compete the House Sparrows at my feeders. More House Finches equals fewer Sparrows!

### FEBRUARY BIRD NOTES

Start listening, Cardinals are beginning to sing and Chickadees are starting to exchanging their soft "Fee Bee" love songs. It's a sure sign that Spring will indeed come.

Keep your seed feeders full, the birds are hungry with the cold weather and snow. Suet is especially helpful to the birds this time of year. And when temperatures are below

freezing, water is hard to find if you're a bird so keep your birdbath full!

Grit is another bird essential that gets scarce when our world is covered in ice and now. You can mix it in with your birdseed, or offer it in a separate, covered feeder. Oriole jelly feeders can serve as winter grit feeders. Sprinkle a few seeds on top of the grit to help the birds find it.

Enjoy your birds!

Ellen S. Montgomery

