



Bird Notes

From Northeast Kingdom Audubon
1302 Main Street, Saint Johnsbury, Vermont 05819

For Immediate Release

Boreal Breeders and the Backyard Bird Count

With the current winter chill gripping us in the fashion we are accustomed to in the North Country, our birding interests may turn to the seedeaters, cone-crunchers and bark-picking trunk-gleaners. During a recent trip to the Moose Bog in Brunswick in pursuit of boreal specialties, I was rewarded with glimpses of the boreal chickadee and flocks of white-winged crossbills, but not the three-toed woodpecker that I sought. However, the trunks were alive with sounds of red-breasted nuthatches, and downy and hairy woodpeckers. This is a place where birders gather as well, to share stories and combine skills and knowledge.

One birder I met was looking for white-winged crossbills in particular. These colorful winter songsters are members of the Finch family, along with the familiar evening grosbeaks, American goldfinches, pine siskins, and house and purple finches. When referring to winter finches, we think of the visiting pine grosbeaks, redpolls (common and hoary) and red and white-winged crossbills. This is a very diverse and interesting group of birds that delight birders all year long.

I was intrigued to learn that the white-winged crossbills may actually breed in January! One would expect other winter breeders like the great-horned and barred owls to handle cold weather nesting better than songbirds. However, when seed production is adequate to meet the high-energy needs of producing eggs and feeding young, these true boreal specialists will nest as early as January. Nests of lichens, twigs and bark strips, lined with hair, grasses and feathers, may be seen as high as 70 feet above the ground on a horizontal conifer branch. The young are fed on regurgitated milky seed pulp for two to three weeks after fledging until their beaks cross enabling them to extract the seeds from the cones. The young may also experience torpor (a light hibernation) as birds like the black chickadees do, to conserve energy. What amazing adaptations! Heads up when you are in the evergreen woods this winter, you may hear them calling and see them flitting around in the tree tops handily opening cones for seeds. I found out later that the birder I had met did see this hardy winter breeder carrying nest material. Confirmed!

If the challenge of boreal birding is a little much for you, don't forget this year's tenth annual Great Backyard Bird Count on President's day weekend, February 16-19. Last year's results showed a southerly flow of winter finches into the east due to frigid temperatures in the north. Our similar cold pattern may bring the winter finches to our feeders and yards for emergency rations. To find out more about counting and reporting the birds in your area, log on to www.birdsource.org/gbbc.

Happy Boreal and Backyard Birding! Bundle up!

(reference: The Breeding Birds of Quebec Atlas)

Carolyn E. Boardman is a board member of NEK Audubon living in Brownington, Vermont. NEK Audubon is one of 8 chapters of Audubon Vermont and part of the National Audubon Society. NEK Audubon is a non-profit organization that encourages people's enjoyment of birds, wildlife and natural habitats through field trips, programs and publications. For more information about meetings, field trips and special events visit www.nekaudubon.org. Art work by Robin Rothman.