



Bird Notes

From Northeast Kingdom Audubon
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For Immediate Release

Winter Bird Forecasting

What can we really look forward to for birds this winter? For the answer to this question, we listen to our neighboring winter bird prognosticators in Canada. I will summarize this foretelling from Ron Pittaway's report on the Ontario Field Ornithologists web page or www.ofo.ca. Let's talk about the visitors like the northern owls such as great grays, snowys, northern hawk owls and northern saw-whet owls. The winter finches as a group include not only the purple finch, but also evening and pine grosbeaks, red and white-winged crossbills, common and hoary redpolls, and pine siskins. A few "irruptive" passerines or songbirds may also bring their appetites south with them as well.

To understand why these birds show up here is to also understand what the summer in Canada was like for small rodents which is related to the seed crop from the year before. This is a very interconnected system. So let's start with the owls. After a big seed/berry/fruit crops in 2006 the small mammals were abundant this year. However, this year's crops are poor due to frozen buds and flowers during a cold and snowy late spring. If small mammal populations crash this fall, then Great Gray Owls, Northern Hawk Owls and Boreal Owls will move, possibly southward into areas accessible by birders. So don't forget to look for the snowy owls out in the fields, sitting on a post perhaps.

When songbird populations irrupt, that means they show up around here in larger numbers. Here are the birds to look for and why they will be around this winter. Red-breasted nuthatch: They have been moving south since mid-June presumably because of the poor cone crop in central Canada. Bohemian waxwing: The poor native mountain ash crop (rowan berries) in much of northern Ontario will cause Bohemians waxwings to wander south and east this winter. Watch for them eating buckthorn berries and crabapples. Blue jay: A strong flight is expected this fall because the beechnut crop is zero and the acorn crop on red oak is only fair to good. Gray jay and boreal chickadee: These are moving around in northeastern Quebec and into the northeastern states.

Generally speaking, the birds in the finch group will be showing up due to the lack of rowan and other berries and seeds and cones. Pine grosbeaks like crabapples; evening grosbeaks like tree seeds. Expect Evening Grosbeaks at bird feeders in the northern United States, but not in the large numbers seen during the 1970s. The finches will be here in response to the low seed crops. Even though the pine cone crops were fair to good, we can expect to see the red crossbills because no hemlock cones have been produced in 2007. The white-winged crossbills move back and forth across northern coniferous forests searching for new cone crops. They will find large cone crops on spruce and balsam fir in the east. There will be a big flight of common and hoary redpolls into southern Ontario and bordering United States to find seed crops of white birch, yellow birch and alder. Expect redpolls at bird feeders this winter. Pine Siskins are attracted to the big spruce and balsam fir cone crops in the east, so don't expect too many of these at feeders this winter.

This is looking like an exciting winter, happy birding!

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 to enjoy 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.