

Early nesting of Pine Siskin in Ontario

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Introduction

THE PINE SISKIN (*Spinus pinus*) is a common bird with a very wide North American distribution (Dawson 1997). It occurs right across Canada (Godfrey 1986). During the winter of 2009 one of the greatest incursions of Pine Siskin into Southern Ontario occurred (Wilcox 2009, Cornell 2009). In this paper we report on early nesting of this species in Southern Ontario. Although March nesting has been reported in Ontario (Pittaway 2007), there are relatively few nesting records for Ontario, with most later than those reported here (Peck and James 1987).

Methods

Two of the authors (AS, RF) operate three banding sites in Wellington County near Guelph. The following table shows the numbers banded between 1998 and 2008.

Table 1. Number of Pine Siskins captured between 1998 and 2008.

| 98 | 99 | 00 | 01 | 02 | 03 | 04 | 05 | 06 | 07 | 08 |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|----|
| 19 | 11 | 6 | 93 | 0 | 2 | 24 | 3 | 9 | 122 | 36 |

In 2009, between 7 January and 31 May, 2,758 birds were trapped, processed, banded and released. On capture, birds were examined to determine their sex. In January and February the sex was determined by the brightness of the yellow and black in their flight feathers (Pyle 1997). If a bird had dull brownish wings and tail with very little yellow it was

deemed to be a female; if a bird had bright black wings and tail with a vivid yellow bar in the wing then it was deemed to be a male; birds that were deemed to have an in-between plumage were deemed to be males. Subsequent recapture of some of these birds (23.6%), and determining their sex by cloacal protuberance/brood patch, showed that the birds cannot be sexed reliably by plumage.

On 22 April, the first birds were caught showing cloacal protuberances and brood patches, thus positive sexual identification could be made. Starting on 5 May, fledged young birds were caught. The new fledglings were able to fly very well, with a sustained flight of at least half

a kilometre. At least one young was seen on the same day being fed by a parent. By early May, females were regrowing their body feathers suggesting that they had finished breeding for the season and were not going to have a second brood. By 31 May, the last day Pine Siskins were seen at any of the banding sites, 46 young fledgling birds had been trapped.

Discussion

Pine Siskins are known to be early nesters (Dawson 1997). Some birds in Western North America, Pennsylvania and New York have nested as early as February. However, in Ontario they mainly nest after mid April (Peck and James 1987).

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Our first young birds in 2009 were caught on 5 May. From personal experience, they must have fledged 4 to 7 days prior to our catching them, given the sustained flight that they seemed to have. Hence they fledged sometime from 24 April to 1 May. Using the data in Weaver and West (1943) the egg laying would have occurred 13 days earlier—i.e. 11-18 April. Assuming a small clutch of 3 eggs, the first egg would have been laid between the 8 and 15 April, with nest building occurring in late March or early April. This would mean nesting that occurred in the spring of 2009 near Guelph would have been among the earliest dates reported in Ontario.

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