

Large Numbers of House Finches in St. Catharines, Ontario

by
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Most people are familiar with the story of the House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) in eastern North America. Since their release in Long Island, New York, in 1940, these birds have spread in all directions, though with a bias towards the southwest, the Atlantic coastline, and major river valleys (Mundinger and Hope 1982).

During the past few years, Ontario, like many other areas in the east, has experienced an influx of House Finches. Data from recent Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs) in Ontario indicate that House Finches are present in several cities across the province. The implication of these data is that most Count areas are experiencing only moderate yearly increases of House Finch numbers (Table 1). But in fact, St. Catharines has undergone a dramatic jump in the size of its House Finch population. St. Catharines, which until December 1982 did not participate in an official CBC (although the Peninsula Field Naturalists has conducted them for its own purposes since 1954), hosts almost as many

House Finches as all of the other Count areas in the province put together.

House Finches first showed up on a St. Catharines CBC in 1980, when five were recorded. By the next year, the number had jumped to 81, and in 1982, there were at least 196.

No-one has yet been able to explain why the number of House Finches is exceptionally large in St. Catharines. This article will present observations on the birds' history and behaviour in the city and on the three feeders in St. Catharines which attract them in record numbers.

In 1980 the first House Finch was seen in St. Catharines, at the feeder of Mr. & Mrs. Frank Kingdon, in the south part of the city. It was in 1980, as well, that a female House Finch was seen at our home (Sean and Mary Ellen Foley) in St. Catharines. At the time, we lived, like the Kingdons, south of the Queen Elizabeth Way (QEW). The changes in feeders in the Foley garden, and the incidence of House Finches at them over the next year, are recorded in Table 2.

Table 1 Number of House Finches on Christmas Bird Counts in Ontario, 1979–1982¹.

	1979	1980	1981	1982
Blenheim	0	0	0	+ ²
Hamilton	0	0	0	95
Kingston	0	8	33	51
Kitchener	0	0	0	2
London	0	0	2	15
Long Point	0	0	0	2
Niagara Falls	10	6	7	28
Oshawa	0	0	4	1
Ottawa-Hull	0	1	0	0
Point Pelee	0	0	3	0
Port Hope	0	0	0	+
Presqu'île	0	0	0	5
Richmond Hill	0	0	1	0
St. Catharines	0	5	81	196
St. Thomas	0	10	3	29
Toronto	0	0	6	2
Woodhouse Twp	0	0	0	2
	10	30	140	428

1. From *American Birds*, Vols 34(4), 1980; 35(4), 1981; 36(4), 1982; and Dennis Rupert (*pers. comm.*), respectively.
2. + = Recorded during Count Period, number not recorded.

Table 2 Characteristics of feeders and visits by House Finches in the Foley garden in St. Catharines, south of the QEW, April 1980–April 1981.

1980

2 feeders: both with mix
 12–20 April 1 female
 20 May 1 male

1981

4 feeders: 1 sunflower,
 1 distelfink (niger seed and white
 millet), 2 mixed
 21–25 Feb. 1 male, 1 female
 26 Feb. – 3 Mar. 3 males,
 2 females

5 Mar. – 18 Apr. As above,
 joined by 1
 orange-variant
 male, all coming
 3–5 times a day
 18–20 Apr. 3 males
 20–25 Apr. 5 males
 25–28 7 males
 29 Apr. 8 red males
 2 orange-variant
 males, 4
 females

In May 1981, 20–24 finches came regularly to our feeders. As far as we know, that was the largest number of House Finches coming to any feeder in St. Catharines at that time.

In June we moved 3.2 km away (as the House Finch flies) to the north part of the city (separated from the south part by the QEW). The record from then until the present is given in Table 3.

Table 3 Characteristics of feeders and visits by House Finches in the Foley garden, north of the QEW, September 1981 to February 1983.

1981

2 feeders: 1 sunflower, 1 mixed
 Sept. no House Finches
 October 5 feeders: 2 sunflower, 2 mixed, 1 distelfink
 7 Oct. – 8 Nov. 1 male
 8 Nov. 7 feeders: 2 more sunflower feeders added
 9 Nov. 4 males
 11 Nov. 5 males, 1 female
 21 Nov. 20 (sexes weren't counted after this)
 23 Nov. 25
 18 Dec. 65

1982

1 Jan. 66
 8 Jan. 89
 29 May The first fledgling appeared at the feeder. From this time until 20 September, we observed at least 10 families, with two to five flying but still

downy, young (at least 30 fledglings), coming to the feeder.
 10–22 June 1 yellow-variant male, often seen feeding a female
 20 Sept. The last fledgling of the season seen at the feeder
 October 9 feeders: 1 more sunflower feeder, and 1 niger stocking added
 27 Oct. 40
 20 Nov.¹ 86
 26 Nov. over 100
 12 Dec. 70

1983

2 Jan. 45
 12 Jan. 82
 4 Feb. 80
 5 Feb. 138 (perhaps the largest number observed at any feeder in eastern Canada)

1. City wide count of House Finches at feeders held.

On 20 November 1982, the Peninsula Field Naturalists organized a simultaneous feeder count of the finches, at three specified times of the day. The highest count — 225 — was recorded at 3:30 pm. Seventy-nine per cent of that number were found in the area of the city north of the Queen Elizabeth Way, although the number of feeders reporting from both north and south was almost equal (21 in the north, 18 in the south). Of that 79 % in the north, 87% were at three feeders.

By late 1982, two other houses in St. Catharines had been recording large numbers of House Finches. In the 1980–81 season, Sam Rossetto had two feeders, attracting approximately 12 House Finches regularly. By the winter of 1982–83, he had added six more sunflower feeders. These attracted 40–50 House Finches daily, and occasionally as many as 90.

Even more dramatic population increases occurred at John and Sue Feurtado's feeders. From two feeders in 1981 (attracting only 3 House Finches), they progressed to seven in December, 1982: six sunflower feeders and one distelfink. On 12 December, 16 House Finches arrived; on 13 December, there were 38; and by 22 December, there were 50. Several times in January of 1983 they had as many as 70, and on the 15th of that month, had 80, their greatest number ever.

In addition to the increasing numbers of House Finches wintering in St. Catharines, House Finches are now breeding there in significant numbers. The first recorded nesting of the House Finch in eastern Canada occurred

at Niagara-on-the-Lake in 1978 (James 1978). In June 1980 a pair nested successfully and brought the fledglings to the Kingdon's feeder in St. Catharines (I. Kingdon, pers. comm.). During this past summer (1983), Dan Kozlovic, a Masters student in ornithology at Brock University, found 65 House Finch nests in St. Catharines, although his search was limited to a small (3.8 sq. km) area in the north part of the city.

Feeders at three residences in the St. Catharines area now regularly attract more than 50 House Finches each. These residences have several things in common. They are all in the north end of the city, which was still being farmed relatively recently (unlike the south), and has, I believe (although I haven't gone so far as to count them), more fruit trees (many of them unsprayed), lining the streets, in parks, and on private property. They all have a large number of feeders — the Feurtados have seven, Sam Rossetto has eight, and the Foleys have nine. At all three homes, there was a disproportionate jump in House Finch numbers when feeders were increased. The majority of feeders in each yard dispense sunflower seeds. All three offer at least a little mixed seed. Most of the sunflower seed feeders conspicuously display the sunflower seeds in large amounts. All three gardens offer several tray-type sunflower seed feeders, which allow the House Finches to crowd onto them — something they seem to like to do. Two of the gardens offer trays on the ground, which are extremely popular, and at the third garden, the majority of the

finches are found eating on the ground anyway. Seed is never allowed to run out at any of the feeders.

One cannot resist speculating on the reasons for the House Finches' attraction to St. Catharines. The same climate which enables the Niagara peninsula to grow grapes may have been an influence. It has also been suggested (A.L.A. Middleton, *pers. comm.*) that, in their natural progression northward (working their way around the lakes), they reached St. Catharines at a time when, by sheer coincidence, ideal weather conditions and an unusual abundance of food made it perfect for breeding. Since then they have simply returned (or stayed) to breed in the place where they were previously successful. If this is the case, then as these conditions fluctuate, or return to normal, the number of House Finches here will dwindle or, at least, cease to accelerate.

The behaviour of House Finches in California (where they are notorious for their destruction of soft fruit crops) may help to explain the presence of the finches here in the Niagara area, where there are so many fruit trees. Many feeders, offering large amounts of seed, particularly sunflowers, also may play a large part in attracting the finches.

At Brock University, Dr. Richard Knapton is beginning a programme of colour-banding St. Catharines' House Finches. The results, we hope, will provide a lot of new and surprising information about this little finch, and will afford us the rare and exciting

opportunity of charting the rapid expansion of a species into new territory.

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Ontario Birds in 1984

At least two issues of *Ontario Birds* will be published in 1984. If sufficient material is submitted, a third issue will probably be published. Deadline for the next issue is 31 January 1984.