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Nesting of White-winged Crossbills in Oxford County

by

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The White-winged Crossbill (*Loxia leucoptera*) normally breeds in the Boreal Forest zone. However, breeding has been confirmed as far south as Presqu'ile Provincial Park, Victoria County, and the Waterloo area (Smith and Lumsden 1987; Weir 1989a). This article details a breeding attempt by White-winged Crossbills in Oxford County. The nesting was at Wildwood Lake, an artificial reservoir in Oxford's northwest corner, and is among the most southerly known nest records in the province.

In the winter of 1989-90, Holdsworth and Graham repeatedly observed about 40 White-winged Crossbills feeding in

spruce (*Picea* spp.) plantations located at the eastern end of Wildwood Lake. As spring arrived, breeding behaviour became apparent. On 17 March 1989, Holdsworth observed several males performing the species' characteristic flight song and displaying strong territorial behaviour. By 29 March 1989, 20 White-winged Crossbills remained, all of which appeared to be paired and very sedentary. These pairs could be found in the same small spruce plantation for several days.

On 7 April, Holdsworth and Graham observed a female White-winged Crossbill carry nesting material into a Norway Spruce

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(*Picea abies*) adjacent to Wildwood Lake. A male accompanied her as she flew to the nest and perched nearby as she added to it. The nest was situated about 5m up, towards the outer parts of the tree, although still well hidden from a distance. The site chosen was typical of those selected by White-winged Crossbills (Harrison 1975). This represented the first nest record for Oxford County.

Several subsequent observations were made by the authors at the nest site. On 16 April, Graham observed the female sitting on the nest for approximately 10 minutes and believed the bird to be incubating eggs. Holdsworth returned 22 April and the pair was still present, although the female did not visit the nest. Several visits thereafter failed to produce any crossbills and due to this lack of activity, both observers felt that the nest had been abandoned. Consequently, on 6 May, Graham climbed the nest tree and collected the nest. There was no sign of eggs or the former presence of young. The nest was complete and was primarily composed of small spruce twigs woven together into a flimsy cup shape. The nest was lined with plant fibers and hair.

While rare, this nesting attempt is not unprecedented for southern Ontario. As well as the previously mentioned southerly records, the following records of possible breeding have been recorded: on 25 March 1985, Dave Martin (pers. comm.) observed a pair of White-

winged Crossbills near a suspected nest site at Fanshawe Lake in Middlesex County. On 2 May, Martin collected a nest at the site that he felt was likely that of a White-winged Crossbill. The nest was sent to the Royal Ontario Museum for identification; the results were inconclusive.

On 17 February 1985, Jeff Skevington observed a pair of White-winged Crossbills at the Oxford Field Study Center, near Woodstock. The pair became agitated when the suspected nest tree was approached, although a nest was not found (pers. comm.).

Besides the recent nest record of White-winged Crossbills at Wildwood Lake, numerous spring (and one summer) records at the reservoir suggest that nesting may have been attempted in the past. A pair of White-wings observed on 17 June 1989 was in almost the exact location as the nesting area (Weir 1989a).

It is also interesting to note that the extensive spruce plantations around Wildwood Lake have hosted various summering/nesting finch species in the past. Summer records of Red Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra*) and nest records of Purple Finches (*Carpodacus purpureus*) and Pine Siskins (*Carduelis pinus*) all lend an authentic "boreal effect" to the area (Holdsworth, pers. obs.).

It is the opinion of the authors that this record does not represent a range extension of the species. Rather, it is thought to be more of a fluctuation beyond the species'

perceived southern range limit. These fluctuations are likely to occur during periods when crossbills invade southern areas (as was the case in the winter/spring of 1989/90). Also, although other northern species have shown marked expansion in Oxford County and the southwest — Red-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta canadensis*); Golden-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus satrapa*); Pine Warbler (*Dendroica pinus*) (Holdsworth, pers. obs.; Weir, 1989b) — these species have increased primarily due to maturing conifer habitat. The habitat the White-winged Crossbills used to nest in at Wildwood Lake was fairly young spruce plantations, and this habitat is widespread throughout Oxford and the southwest. If White-winged

Crossbills were truly expanding into southern Ontario, it would be likely that they would be found much more regularly throughout the areas supporting young spruce plantations.

The future of the White-winged Crossbill's nesting status in southern Ontario is likely as uncertain as the comings and goings of the birds themselves.

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Notes

Red-breasted Nuthatch Nesting in Residential Waterloo

In 1989, a pair of Red-breasted Nuthatches (*Sitta canadensis*) successfully nested in our back yard in residential Waterloo. Several aspects of this nesting seemed exceptional to me: this species breeding in a large urban centre, its choice of nesting site, and interspecific interactions. I was fortunate to observe nesting activity from the first day of excavation to the first fledgling's flight from the nest hole.

The Red-breasted Nuthatch prefers coniferous or mixed forests as reflected in its provincial distribution which is most dense across the Canadian Shield and the boreal forest. In southwestern and south-central Ontario its sporadic distribution is of relatively recent origin, and likely due to the maturity and proliferation of coniferous plantations (Mills 1987). In New York state, it was mainly confined to higher elevations in the