

CANADIAN ZONE BREEDERS OF CENTRAL BERKSHIRE

By Edwin J. Neumuth

The habitat that most clearly defines the uniqueness of Berkshire County within Massachusetts is its large tracts of native red spruce and spruce/fir community on side hills and summits, particularly over 1600 feet in elevation. These Canadian-zone wet woodlands most closely approximate the higher-latitude forests favored by northern avifauna that extend their range south into the hills of the Berkshire and Taconic ranges. Among those birds that seem to have a clear affinity for nesting in such a habitat are Golden-crowned Kinglet, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Red and White-winged crossbills, and Evening Grosbeak.

Golden-crowned Kinglet

The Golden-crowned Kinglet has been described as an uncommon and local nester in Massachusetts and Berkshire County. Its numbers during spring and fall migration vary greatly from year to year. Historically a bird nesting in naturally occurring stands of native conifers, the Golden-crowned Kinglet has adapted to lower-elevation plantations of introduced spruce (especially Norway spruce), which accounts for several breeding records for Eastern Massachusetts. In Berkshire County, however, this winter-hardy kinglet is regular during the nesting season, and with a sharp ear alert for its high-pitched notes and song, and a concerted search in favored locations, you should be able to observe it without a great deal of difficulty.

Perhaps the most consistent numbers of this species occur during the nesting season, since wintering populations and seasonal migrants fluctuate greatly from year to year. Golden-crowned Kinglets are variably migratory, and some nesting populations may remain irregularly as winter residents, augmenting numbers of migrants that arrive from more northerly areas to winter in Massachusetts.

In the Berkshires from late March through April, the habitat choice of this species is much less selective, and birds can be found throughout the county. As breeding season approaches, however, habitat selection becomes much more specific, and the favored location for this kinglet is dense, high-elevation conifer stands. Areas that seem to be consistently productive occur on Mount Greylock, Windsor State Forest, and Notchview Reservation (a Trustees of Reservations property) in Windsor, Florida, and Savoy in the northeastern corner of the county; Dorothy Rice Sanctuary in Peru; and October Mountain State Forest in the town of Washington. The Golden-crowned Kinglet's fall migration, when its numbers are once again inflated, appears to be mid-September through October.

Thirty-one years of records from the Central Berkshire Christmas Bird Count demonstrate how variable winter populations of Golden-crowned Kinglets can be. In the years 1968-1984, Golden-crowned Kinglets appeared in nine out of 17 years, with a maximum number of 11; 13 of the last 14 years of the count have recorded this species, with a maximum number of 64 in 1998, while in 1997, with identical coverage, not a single Golden-crown was seen. Most of these wintering birds are found in close association with spruce habitat and seem to favor foraging at edges where the forest becomes transitional to mixed conifer-hardwood. Look for the Golden-crowned Kinglet in the company of chickadees and Red-breasted Nuthatches.

Ruby-crowned Kinglet

In Berkshire County, the Ruby-crowned Kinglet is a relatively common spring and fall migrant. A few early winter records exist, but survival throughout that season is rather unlikely, in contrast to the Golden-crowned Kinglet. The high Berkshire County hills with associated large stands of red spruce/spruce-fir forest seem to present optimal nesting habitat for this northern kinglet, but we seem to be at the extreme southern edge of its breeding range, for only a few confirmed nesting records exist. The task of finding nesting Ruby-crowns is made more difficult by the preference this bird shows for inaccessible, dense habitat. Fortunately, its song is easily recognized, and singing males in appropriate habitat heard after the first of June should prompt a careful search for evidence of breeding.

The areas of the county that would appear to be most productively searched for evidence of nesting during June and July are similar to those mentioned above for the Golden-crowned Kinglet, and specifically, the most northern of those areas. Nesting has been documented in the town of Savoy (1976) and subsequently suspected on Mount Greylock and Savoy Mountain State Forest in Florida — the northeastern corner of Berkshire County. With more intensive field coverage in this area, a clearer picture of the status of the Ruby-crowned Kinglet as a Berkshire County breeding species will emerge.

Evening Grosbeak

Historically a breeding bird of the Pacific Northwest, the Evening Grosbeak has expanded its wintering and nesting range remarkably over the past century. Initially a winter visitor to Massachusetts, with arrival in October and departure in May, its appearance during the nesting season has gone from occasional in the 1950s and 1960s to somewhat regular in Berkshire County since the mid-1970s.

Interestingly, the winter appearance of Evening Grosbeaks over the past eight years in any sizable flocks has become something of an uncommon event. Using Central Berkshire Christmas Count (CBCC) records as a reflection of winter abundance, this species appeared annually and often in great numbers

(maximum 1682), and was considered among the most common wintering birds in the county. Nothing even remotely approaching this abundance has occurred over the past decade. Because of the high variability in populations of these irruptive northern finches, the appearance of only two individuals on the Central Berkshire CBC in 1988 generated only mild local attention. In the most recent seven years, however, Evening Grosbeak has been unrecorded in three count years, and only a single bird was seen another year. Numbers in the remaining three years have ranged from only 15 to 250.

As one might expect from its classification as a northern finch, Evening Grosbeak favors coniferous forest habitat or mixed forest for nesting. Although a nest has not been located in Massachusetts to date, nesting has been strongly suggested on at least two occasions by the presence of adult birds feeding young — the first of such sightings taking place in Berkshire County in 1980. From June through August of 1983, variable-sized flocks of up to 35 adult birds visited my home in Washington, adjacent to the very appealing habitat of October Mountain State Forest. Although no young were seen, a female with a brood patch was found dead alongside the road early that summer.

The areas of the county referred to under the Golden-crowned Kinglet account seem to offer the most consistent opportunities for viewing this grosbeak during summer. By slowly driving the dirt roads adjacent to the large stands of spruce, single birds and small flocks can occasionally be sighted as they pick up grit from the roadside. Their loud call notes, often given in flight, make them conspicuous as they pass overhead. Their attraction to bird feeders has also been the source of some summer sight records, although over the past few years, bear vandalism at feeders has prompted the removal of feeding stations during the most likely time to observe newly fledged young with adults. As with Berkshire weather, attempting anything close to an accurate prediction for the status of Evening Grosbeak in the years to come is best characterized as guesswork.

Red Crossbill

The Red Crossbill is perhaps the most nomadic of the northern finches. It has been reported during every month of the year in Berkshire County but seems to be most commonly recorded as an irregular winter visitor associated with the larger tracts of conifer forest. October Mountain State Forest and adjacent Pittsfield Watershed land in the central Berkshire town of Washington have been particularly productive in flight years. Here, if the cone crop is plentiful, the Red Crossbills will often hang upside down from the cone clumps at the tops of spruces, the loud snapping as they pull seeds apart giving away their presence. Their loud, distinct *jip* note, given in flight and during feeding, is another auditory clue to their location. Often, small flocks appear along the higher-elevation spruce-lined roadsides, apparently searching for grit and

possibly road salt, especially after a snowstorm, when Washington Mountain Road has been freshly plowed and sanded. Auto-related mortality can be significant at such times. Small flocks are the general rule, and as much as one would think this species might have an affinity for the high Berkshire Hills, Red Crossbills are surprisingly uncommon. No Berkshire breeding records exist, although this species has nested in Eastern Massachusetts, most commonly along the coastal plain, probably in stands of pitch pine.

White-winged Crossbill

White-winged Crossbills also tend to be highly unpredictable in Massachusetts generally and in Berkshire County specifically. During flight years when these finches move south into our area in winter, they seem to have a relatively close association with the larger conifer stands in the county. Occasionally observed during other seasons as well, especially following a significant winter presence, this species has yet to be confirmed as a breeder in the state. Berkshire County would seem to be the most promising area to look for such an occurrence.

The last major influx of White-winged Crossbills in the Berkshires occurred during the winter of 1989-90. Three adults appeared in the town of Washington on July 30, 1989, and numbers swelled through late summer and fall of that year to occasional sightings of flocks in excess of 100 birds. White-winged Crossbills were present in significant numbers irregularly into the following spring, with the last large flock of adult birds (about sixty) noted in April and individual birds reported as late as June 6. Although that flight would have seemed to be an ideal circumstance favoring nesting early in spring, attempts to prove breeding by this species were unsuccessful. As with the Red Crossbill, looking for birds picking up roadside salt and grit where the paved road penetrates the forest is often a productive way to search for this species. Driving a short distance beyond where you see them and quietly waiting for the birds to return will pay off most of the time. Be alert as well for their song, often given in flight — a loud, dry, varyingly pitched trill.

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