

# YOUNG BIRDERS

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*(Editor's note: We all know of, or have been in the field with, some exceptional young birders. This issue of Bird Observer inaugurates an occasional series of features and observations by the talented youth who are out and about in our region.)*

## Crossbills

*Scott Yanco*

A gusty wind was blowing through the open windows of the car as my mother and I drove down the streets of the campground at Salisbury State Park. I was thinking of how curious our behavior must seem, driving through a campground by the ocean, in January, with the windows down and the heat off (so that birdcalls could be heard better), with our heads protruding from the car. But my thoughts were abruptly cut off. "Flock!" I said, before the image of sixteen undulating birds flying above the stunted pines even registered in my mind.

We turned down one of the many crossroads, to follow the birds. We saw them descend suddenly onto one of the trees, so we pulled the car off the road four campsites away. Immediately we discovered that they were Red Crossbills, an irruptive finch found in this area only during the winter months. Part of their allure is the unique feature that gives them their name: the upper mandible is angled one way while the lower is angled the other way, hence "crossbill." The birds use their odd beak for prying open pinecones and retrieving the seeds that lie hidden at the center.

I picked up the camera with my new telephoto lens and moved closer. I came to the seawall and began to walk along it. All of a sudden I heard chirp notes and the fluttering of wings. I looked ahead and in the air were the sixteen crossbills, but they had been joined by thirty-five common redpolls, another finch from northern latitudes. The flock swirled above my head, breaking apart into smaller flocks, only to join together again and float through the air as one aggregate being whose form is fluid and ever changing, morphing from a ball to a line to an undulating blob and back again. Eventually the flocks split apart by species, and the redpolls set down in the sand and on the cement curbing along the river's edge. The crossbills flew in my direction at almost eye level. Most of the birds flew past me, but a few stopped in the trees next to me for a few brief seconds. Before I could raise either binoculars or camera, they were gone.

I got back in the car, and we took off in the direction that the crossbills had taken. Once again we pulled off the road a few campsites away. This time I loaded my pockets with extra film and a lens cleaner to brush off the droplets of water that were collecting from the light drizzle that had begun. My mom and I crouched under the tree next to the one that was alive with the animated red birds. In the silence we could hear the crackle of pinecones as they were pried open. I took shot after shot; I was through one roll before I knew it. We watched as the birds hung from the tree in every direction, frantically working the pinecones as though they were about to disappear.

When they had finished with the tree next to us, they moved into ours! The rhythmic click of the camera shutter stopped, since a clear shot was impossible. Instead, we watched in awe as the birds feasted no more than six feet above our heads. The contrast between the male's red body and black wings seemed to be even crisper, and the yellow rump patch of the females seemed to be even brighter. And the sound of their feeding grew more intense. They only stopped eating every once in a while to glance our way. Soon this source of food began to run out, and one by one the birds left the tree, flying a short distance (not more than ten feet) to the next tree, until only one bird remained — a male. Hanging upside down from a pinecone, he methodically used the unique tool that was his beak to pry open the cone bit by bit, taking the seeds as he went. Then, without warning, he too left us.

None of the birds went far. They were close enough to photograph, especially as they fluttered down to a puddle to drink. Here I could see that a feature that had been a help, become a hindrance; their wonderful beaks, which evolution had sculpted to perfection for their feeding technique, posed a distinct problem when it came to getting water. The birds had to turn their heads sideways to drink.

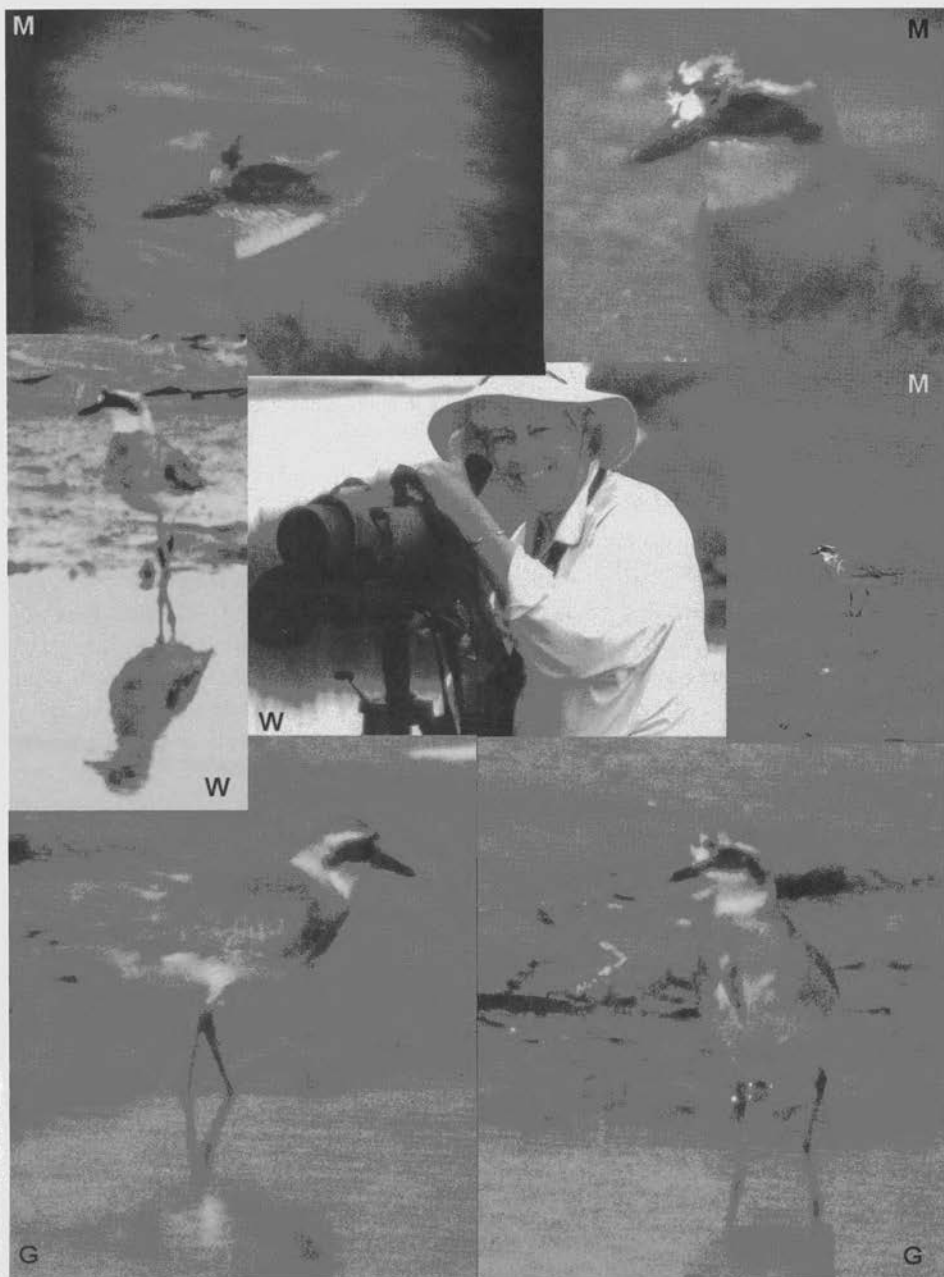
Suddenly two of the birds uttered harsh notes in staccato bursts and took to the air. They fluttered in amazing aerial acrobatics as they locked in what seemed like combat. Up, up, up they went, quarreling all the way. Then they ceased flying and pried at each other with their bills, at which point they began tumbling, earthbound. Before they became intimate with the pavement below, the loser was declared, and we watched as he left the area and began feeding on the outskirts of the flock in a different tree. At the opposite end of the behavioral spectrum, we saw a male pull a seed out of a pinecone and lean down from his perch to give it to a female resting on a lower branch. Crossbills are known to display courtship feeding. However, this would seem unusual in the winter, and no references to this behavior could be found in the literature.

One hour and several rolls of film later the birds moved on, and so did we, knowing that nothing for a long time was going to top that experience. It reminded me of how spending more time with each bird can be just as rewarding as trying to rack up a huge list or find something unusual. I really felt as though I knew the character of this species. This experience has taught me to look at birds for what they are, and not for what they could be. 🐦

**Scott Yanco**, age 15 lives in Medway, MA. His first birding experience came when he was nine years old, on a spring trip to Mount Auburn Cemetery. From that time on he has been hooked. Scott is also a founding member of the Sustainability/Environmental Committee at his school, which has raised money to buy land in Brazil, gotten disposable utensils and dishes banned from the cafeteria, started a recycling center, and reduced the school's electricity usage.



*Digital image by Dotty Moffett*



The author at the Charlestown Breachway on 7/25/99 and one of her very favorite birds. Digital images by Stephen Mirick (M, top two were taken through a telescope) of Newmarket, NH, and photographs by Donald Wilkinson (W) of Wakefield, MA, and Arie Gilbert (G) of Flushing, NY. The editors appreciate the use of these images.