

## ARE HOUSE FINCHES DRIVING OUT PURPLE FINCHES?

Henry T. Wiggin, Annisquam

Are House Finches driving out Purple Finches? First, let me say that I have no direct evidence of this, either pro or con. I have never seen House Finches show antagonistic displays toward Purple Finches. This article has been written merely so that other birders will be prompted to make their own observations. One thing, though, is certain: in the past few years House Finches have had a population explosion, and Purple Finches are down in numbers. Whether or not this is a coincidence will take further study by many other observers.

I can give the results of my own observations in Annisquam, Massachusetts, where I have spent the last fifty summers. Since 1953 I have taken a breeding bird census there yearly. The census area is approximately 0.4 mile wide and 0.7 mile long, shaped somewhat like a rectangle. It includes homes, a pasture, streetfronts, tangles of brush, beach rose, a small wooded area and a sandy beach. In recent years, the number of singing male purple finches has been as follows:

1964	7
1965	5
1966	7
1967	5
1968	12
1969	7
1970	10
1971	11
1972	(no census, in Europe)
1973	4
1974	6
1975	4

More important, to me anyway, is the fact that in the past few years I have seen few or no young Purple Finches, whereas formerly they were a common sight. Part of the reason may be that Purple Finches are no longer "backyard" birds as they formerly were. The Purple Finches of Annisquam have taken up territory on the borders of the scrub pasture land (where species such as the Field Sparrow nest) and in similar habitats.

I first saw House Finches in Annisquam on August 17, 1971 when two birds flew over. The next observation was July 12, 1972, when I saw one bird. In neither year did the birds breed in my territory. When I arrived in Annisquam on the Memorial Day weekend in 1973, however, House Finches were singing on top of my TV antenna, where formerly Purple Finches sang. They nested in my yard and in a neighbor's vine (on his house) up the street.

The numbers of singing male House Finches in my breeding bird censuses have been

1973	3
1974	6
1975	5

House Finches and their young are now common summer visitors to my bird baths, bushes and the like.

Presumably any House Finch-Purple Finch territorial battles would take place in Annisquam in May, before I arrive for the summer. Birders living year-round in any area where both House Finches and Purple Finches breed should keep an eye open to see if these conflicts do take place, and they should also take censuses to see if House Finches are increasing while Purple Finches decrease in that area.

### NEWS ITEM

From the Public Service Information Bulletin of the Massachusetts Audubon Society we learn that there have been two changes in staff positions. As of the first of September, Deborah V. Howard is Director of Environmental Affairs and Richard A. Forster is Atlas Project organizer.

## THOSE CONFUSING WARBLERS

It's happened again.

Another glorious migration of woodland warblers has passed through New England and my record in observing them is a shambles, as usual.

Twenty-five years ago, Roger Tory Peterson assured me that before publication of his field guide and its full-color illustrations, the average birder required 25 years to sort out the warblers. The book, he said, had changed all that. Henceforth all who sallied forth could be instant warbler identifiers.

The instantaneous bit may work rather well on such groundwalkers as the palm warblers or the waterthrushes (which are warblers in spite of the name) but it has limitations among those quicker-than-a-flick warblers that skip around in the tree canopy. I can recall that once in the 25 years I have seen an upper-storey warbler posing as Peterson depicts it in the field guide. It happened four years ago and was so unusual that I may never forget it. It was a Blackburnian warbler and its splashes of color in the bright sunlight were magnificent.

Unfortunately, most of the treetop warblers flit among leaves, seldom exposing more than 10 percent of the body. Usually the exposure is not particularly revealing. It is sort of tantalizing, like the fan dancers who entertained a generation which assumed that the movie actress who began the film fully-dressed would continue so to the end.

It is theoretically true that were one to amass enough 10 percent segments, one eventually should have 100 percent of a warbler. But, it is a frustration of warbler watching that it seldom works out that way. What usually happens is that one keeps observing the same 10 percent as the bird moves among leaves. One too often winds up with an excellent visual record of a tail that might be attached to any of several species.

Over the years, I suppose that the bird I could be most certain about has been the black-throated blue warbler. The male, that is. Even though the bird's belly is white, none other has such a striking combination of black and blue. It is hard to mistake from any angle.

Part of my problem is that Roger keeps showing me the warblers as though he expected me either to be on a level with them or looking down on them from a hovering helicopter. He should have given me a fistful of chins, breasts, bellies and tails, all sketched from the angle of one looking up at the bottom side of the bird. If he had painted the chin and bill separated from the end of the tail by an intervening leaf, we might have made it in those 25 years. Provided, of course, that such a picture was immediately definitive in the flash of a second.

What really annoys me, I'm certain, is that there are persons rather adept at making identifications with no more evidence than I have indicated. Always a skeptic, I have checked out birds they have identified by watching for more information, and too often found the observation correct.

I must admit that one who truly knows the warblers should be able to make valid identifications from fragments. That's the game. But one has only a handful of days each year to become familiar with most of those tiny vagrants.

Wayne Hanley, Massachusetts Audubon Society

## AUDUBON SHORTS

The wandering albatross is as dependent on the wind as a sailboat. This bird lives around the world over the oceans from 30 to 60 degrees south latitude where the wind seldom drops below 40 m.p.h. Soaring and gliding are so natural that it can rest in the air.

The wingspan of the wandering albatross is nine to fourteen feet and the width of the wings is about nine inches. The breast muscles are weak; this bird cannot beat its wings for long. It soars and glides 30 to 57 m.p.h. in a shallow layer of air from sea level up to 45 feet using the rising air currents by relying on the variations in wind speed for sustained flight.

Massachusetts Audubon Society

## "Spshing" and Its Biological Significance

The first trick most birders learn is that certain species can be lured into view by a soft hissing noise, often referred to locally as "pishing." I make this sound with my tongue against both the hard palate and incisors (as if pronouncing the Russian letter " = ts"), breaking the air flow frequently by closing my lips.

Apparently, the method of making this soft luring sound by mouth alone is a relatively recent innovation. In a footnote to the 1895 edition of H. D. Minot's Land-birds and Game-birds of New England, William Brewster recommended, "placing the lips against the back of the hand and making a continuous, shrill 'screeeping' sound. This excites [the birds'] sympathy or curiosity, or both." Even in 1932 Frank M. Chapman advocated in Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America, "The 'squeak' ... made by placing the lips to the back of the hand or finger and kissing vigorously."

According to Neal Griffith Smith in the April 1975 issue of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, both the "new" and "old" types of sound have biological significance! In his report, this Smithsonian researcher refers to the soft sound made by mouth alone as "spshing." Smith writes: "Birds drawn into view by squeaks and other noises often vocalize, have their crest feathers erected, and their wings drawn out from their bodies. Birds reacting to a 'spshing noise' do not vocalize. They not only reveal themselves, but approach the sound source with their feathers smoothed down and their wings held in a normal position. They behave in a not obviously hostile, curious manner. Not all birds are attracted to this noise. In the New World, only certain members of the passerine families Vireonidae (Vireos), Parulidae (Wood Warblers), Thraupidae (Tanagers), Icteridae (Orioles and Blackbirds), and Fringillidae (Finches) do so ... Positive attraction to 'spshing' is particularly characteristic of those species in these families which wander over great distances in the nonbreeding season and those which migrate into the Neotropics and which, at least initially, join flocks of local Neotropical species."

He goes on to note that resident birds in the Neotropics (including the West Indies, Central America, and South America north of the equator) are not generally attracted to spshing sounds. A few of these species react unfavorably to these sounds, which are similar to some of their contact or alarm calls. On the other hand, migrants to the Neotropics that change their insectivorous diet to fruits and nectar are attracted to Neotropical resident passive nuclear species that make spsh-like sounds. However, migrants that do not change their diet, do not respond to spshing.

Smith concludes: "It is advantageous for those migrants that switch their diets and enter, most of them for the first time, into the strange tropical environment, to follow the locals around, at least initially. The probability of finding suitable food is increased and they may share in the locals' knowledge of what is to be avoided ... Another advantage to joining the locals is an antipredator one, for with the locals' knowledge of potential predators, plus the factor of additional 'eyes,' the mixed species association cannot help but be advantageous to both migrant and resident species alike."

In the Old World, neither resident temperate species nor migrants to the tropics join mixed flocks or are attracted to spshing. Why? Smith concludes that the available food supply at the tropical wintering grounds is the reason. From North America an estimated 14 billion migrants flood the Neotropics (land area only four million square kilometers) at a time when the food supply (especially insects) is low. Contrast this situation with that in Africa, where only 3 1/4 billion migrants enter a land area of 20 million square kilometers when food is plentiful. According to Smith, "As compared to the Neotropics, the much lower migrant density in Africa and the abundance of food upon the migrants' arrival negate the need for the migrants to join the local flocks. It further negates the need to evolve a system of seeking out local expertise."

In New England we also have passive nuclear species, such as the Dark-eyed Junco and Tufted Titmouse, which act as cores for mixed species flocks in autumn and winter. (Incidentally, in addition to their spsh-like vocalizations, passive nuclear species are also gregarious among themselves and have dull plumage coloration.) Birds that associate with these species, such as migrant warblers, react positively to spshing, in an adaptation to unfamiliar environments.

For the benefit of the Massachusetts birder, I have appended a list of those local species which Smith found to be attracted to spshing in the Republic of Panama:

Red-eyed Vireo	Bay-breasted Warbler
Philadelphia Vireo	American Redstart
Yellow-throated Vireo	Canada Warbler
Black-and-white Warbler	Orchard Oriole (fall only)
Prothonotary Warbler	Northern Oriole
Golden-winged Warbler	Summer Tanager
Tennessee Warbler	Scarlet Tanager
Black-throated Green Warbler	Indigo Bunting
Blackburnian Warbler	Dickcissel
Chestnut-sided Warbler	

The following species were NOT attracted to spshing:

Kentucky Warbler	Louisiana Waterthrush
Mourning Warbler	Wilson's Warbler
Northern Waterthrush	Rose-breasted Grosbeak

Leif J. Robinson, Wellesley

#### BOBOLINKS

A gang of holdovers from horse-and-buggy days passed through a nearby field recently.

They were bobolinks, more than 100 of them, all males. It was a sight seldom seen today. An earlier generation of New Englanders might have wondered about my haste to reach the field and see these now uncommon migrants. For bobolinks were common birds of the region, at least into post-Civil War days.

Indeed, in those years when my summers were heated by hot winds off the Great Plains, I supposed that were I ever to reach New England the rare bobolink along the Missouri River would become a commonplace bird. The New England poets treated them so. Alas, the poets' era was a much earlier one.

Our first acquaintance with the bobolink arose from a small card found in a box of baking soda. It depicted a most unusual bird. It was a blackbird with a white back and buffy feathers at the nape of the neck.

In that unliberated age the baking soda manufacturer had the nerve to show only the male bird. But the male is the interesting bobolink. The females wear subdued dingy browns, as befits a bird that nests on the ground. Only the male sports a white back and black undersides, the reversal of normal color distribution in birds.

Bobolinks perhaps reached an epitome of population when horsepower came wrapped in horsehide. Hayfields then flourished near urban centers, supplying hay and bedding for city horses. The bobolink nests in tall grass. By the turn of the century, bobolinks were on the downgrade in New England. Early conservationists were designing flush bars which would precede the cutter bar of horse-drawn hay cutting machines. It was supposed that the cutter bars were destroying young bobolinks inexperienced with mechanical hay cutting. An earlier generation had cut hay by hand scythe.

Actually, farms were on the wane and open land was disappearing as woods. At the same time, bobolinks were being shot by the thousands in the South as market game. Bobolinks brought gunners 25 cents per dozen cleaned birds. The birds were sold in northern markets at 75 cents to \$1 a dozen, and were considered fare for spendthrift epicures. It gives one a dimension of money value in those days.

Bobolinks still breed in New England and in the Maritimes, but in reduced numbers. In a recent survey, Deborah Howard of the Massachusetts Audubon Society found the birds using the pastures of defunct or dying dairies. The fields had been abandoned a year or two and weeds were intruding upon the grass. Almost all sites were near a pond. In most instances, the birds' tenancy was numbered. The fields were to become housing sites. Even if they were not, trees soon would make the field unattractive to bobolinks.

The survey, oddly enough, was begun because New Englanders of today are not certain what sort of sites bobolinks prefer. Once they seemed to be everywhere. Now nothing seems to serve them.

Wayne Hanley, Massachusetts Audubon Society



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