

THE HOUSE FINCH IN MASSACHUSETTS

by Bruce Sorrie, Quincy

The House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) was officially recognized on the East Coast of the United States more than twenty-five years ago when the first specimen was taken at Hewlett, Nassau County, Long Island, in January of 1948 (Elliott and Arbib).

The recorded history of the House Finch in Massachusetts began 9 years later with the report in the Records of New England Birds of a single bird seen at Bartholomew's Cobble in June of 1957. A year later another bird was identified and reported from South Weymouth. Records are not available from 1960 to 1963 but during that time no House Finches were reported on any of the Massachusetts Christmas Counts and it seems apparent that there was no significant movement of House Finches into the state during those early years. However, in the spring of 1964 a single bird was seen in Easthampton and by the fall and winter of that same year reports of single birds came from Nahant, Chelmsford, Needham, and Concord, with 25 sighted in Jamestown, R.I. The 1964 Cape Cod Christmas Count reported House Finches for the first time: twenty of them. By 1966 they were identified and recorded in Massachusetts during every month (RNEB) and in the spring of 1967 what appears to be the first nesting record was documented from Longmeadow, Hamden County. The years since have been marked by impressive increases in numbers reported, in addition to the increase in localities from which birds have been seen. The extent of the former may be judged in part by noting that the Cape Cod Christmas Count for 1972 documents 493 House Finches.

An attempt to learn something of the movement and dispersal of this newly arrived species began in the fall of 1970 with the initiation of a color banding project by the Manomet Bird Observatory. At six locations birds were trapped and banded with a Fish and Wildlife Service band in addition to color bands coded to each location. This method helped provide information through sight reports of color banded birds which supplemented the information gained through actual recovery of banded birds. Because House Finches come readily to feeders they proved to be an excellent subject for this type of study.

Successful banding sites were located in Hingham, Duxbury, Manomet, Marshfield, Plymouth and Lexington, with 2218 birds banded between 1970 and 1974.

The Lexington location, at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Parker Reed, was by far the most productive but was atypical in terms of the vegetation and habitat generally associated with House Finches. The Reed residence is in a well established residential neighborhood of mature shrubbery and tall shade trees. Houses are set fairly close together and there are few open areas. The appearance of large numbers of birds here would seem to be attributed to the excellence of the feeding area which includes a year round food supply of generous quantity and great variety. House Finches begin arriving here in large numbers in late July and continue until November when they virtually disappear. An overwhelming 98% are young birds, many of them still in juvenile plumage.

The remaining banding locations were remarkable for their similarity. They were largely in residential areas of open lawns and large fields often characterized by stands of young red cedar and invariably with water in close proximity.

Only two foreign recoveries were taken in the five years of banding: one at Hingham and the second in Lexington. Both recoveries were in the early years of the project and both from the same banding location near Portsmouth, R.I. Massachusetts birds have been seen or recovered as far south as Alexandria, Virginia, and St. Michaels, Maryland, and to the north in Rye and Concord, New Hampshire. A substantial majority of recoveries and sightings have been from areas within 10 to 15 miles of the original banding location, and seem to suggest typical finch-like wandering, rather than any pattern of migration.

Evidence obtained from this study also suggests that Massachusetts House Finches have a strong fidelity to habitat, and a definite habitat preference. This is supported further by noting the marked similarity between House Finch nesting localities in 1974 (Howard) and locations of early sightings from 1965 to 1967. Concentrations are apparent along the coastal plain north and south of Boston and along the Connecticut River valley, where vegetation in some locations is remarkably like that of the coastal plain. Massachusetts House Finches are particularly at home in urban areas as are their western counterparts. These traits should be recognized in any prediction of future areas for expansion in Massachusetts or the northern New England states.

REFERENCES

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THE CARE AND FEEDING OF CHICKADEES

From our backyard experiences we regard Black-capped Chickadees as gregarious and friendly birds that chatter a lot while they eat sunflower seed and suet. If you watch a feeder closely, you should soon notice that the same birds return day after day -- a bent, broken, or missing primary; a characteristic gesture; or a preferred "hammering post" help to identify individuals.

But what if the food were to be taken away? A study in the winter of 1968-69 by Edward Mueller of Boston University (*The Auk*, 90, 3, July, 1973) shows that chickadees abandon an empty feeder within about two days. When the food was restored after three days, the birds returned at nearly the same rate as they left.

Mr. Mueller's two feeders were set up about 600 feet apart, and it became clear that certain birds preferred one station over the other. For example, when the food was removed from Station 1, only about half of its feeding population moved to Station 2. It seems that although chickadees maintain bounded wintering ranges, certain birds will freely switch. Mr. Mueller remarks, "All the evidence in this study indicated that the relations between birds and space was at the individual level ... We never noted a sudden influx of many outsiders, as though a flock of visitors had acted in unison in abandoning its regular range."

Finally, chickadees are indeed friendly. Aggressive encounters between birds were found to be low, not only within a foraging band, but toward visitors that may have joined in the unending search for sunflower seeds and suet.

L.J.R.



BOHEMIAN WAXWING, THE GLADES, NORTH SCITUATE, 2 NOVEMBER 1975
Photographed by Bruce A. Sorrie