

A NEW LOOK AT THE HOUSE FINCH SPRING MIGRATION

By Elinor G. McEntee

Much has been written about the tremendous increase of the House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) in the mid-Atlantic states, and we know that they nest in the New York City region and that many, if not most of them, disperse from that area in late summer and move in a southwesterly direction toward Philadelphia and thence on south and west to Maryland and Virginia. By October they have reached the eastern Pennsylvania banding stations, and by December they are as far south as northern Virginia.

While some are still moving south, others have already started their return movement to the northeast, and it is this particular leg of their journey which is the subject of this article. Is this movement toward the nesting grounds in a more or less straight line up and back, or does it follow some other pattern? After four years of banding comparatively large numbers of this species, and making a study of recoveries and foreign retraps, it would appear that a large proportion of the eastern House Finches may move clockwise in a sort of circular or elliptical pattern at the upper, or northern, leg of their "migration."

From my recovery records the movements of some House Finches passing through Ridgewood in the winter and spring can be traced in an easterly direction across the Hudson River into Westchester County in New York and lower Connecticut (Greenwich and Fairfield), and then, even more significantly, somewhat southeasterly to the western end of Long Island. Some birds banded in Ridgewood are known to have nested on Long Island, and others can be presumed to have done so.

This seems to be the clockwise movement at the top of the curve of the spring migration, which is evidence that a large number of the eastern House Finch population does not move up and back along a relatively straight line. (See Fig. 1.) Instead, many, if not most, of those arriving in northern New Jersey (Bergen County) from January through March are simply passing through on a continuous curve toward a further destination to the east and south for nesting. A few may remain to ultimately nest locally, but the winter population here in Ridgewood is not static from January through March. It is a constantly moving stream of hundreds upon hundreds of birds. This is proved by the fact that fewer than 10% of the House Finches in the area at any given time wear bands. No matter how many are banded in one day, the 5%-10% ratio still holds. Each day quite evidently brings in a new flight and there are very few repeats until later in the spring when the local nesting population begins to build up. (See Table No. 1.) With over 1,000 House Finches banded in 1966, representing 10% or less of those that went through my yard, imagine the potential of unbanded thousands!

Figure 1. Spring Migration of the House Finch

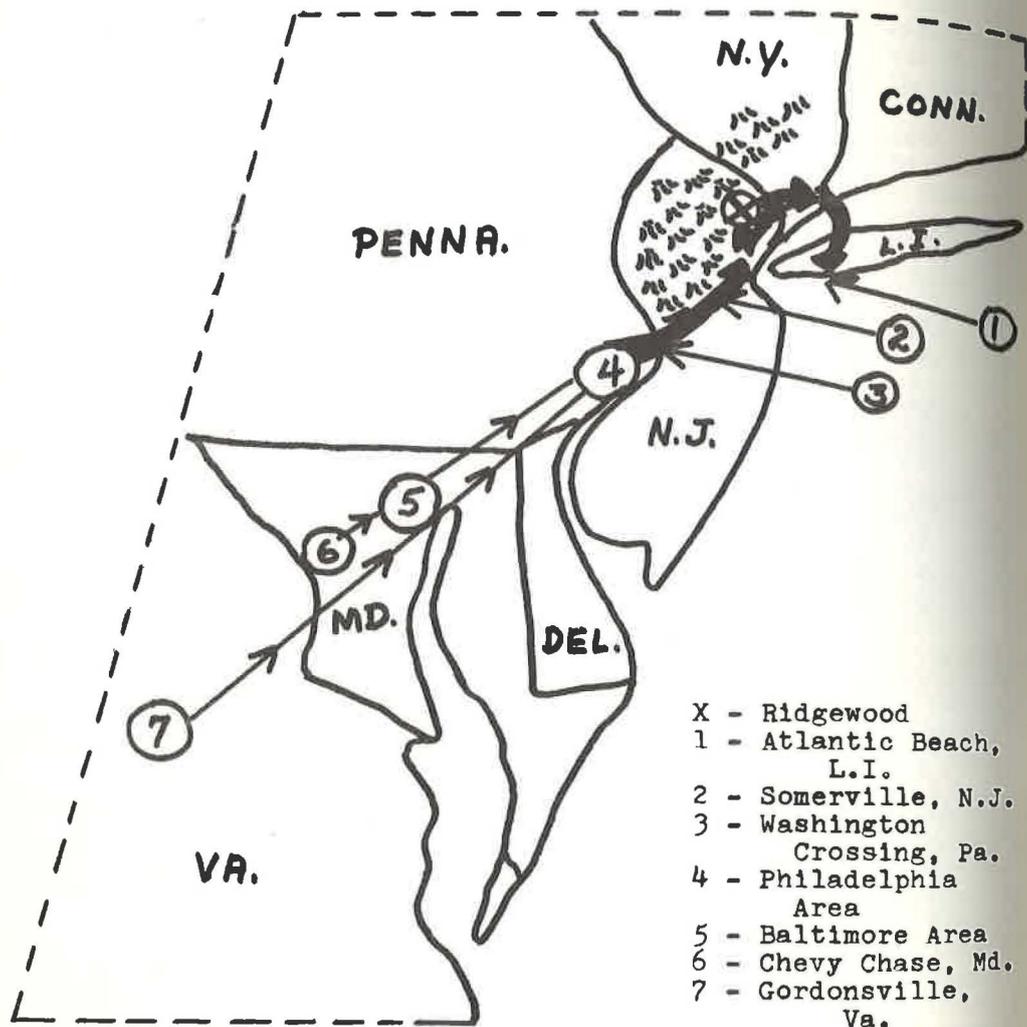


Table No. 1

Recoveries of House Finches Banded in Ridgewood

Band No.	Date Banded	Date Recovered	Recovery Location
65-58676	03-26-64	04-19-64	Cedarhurst, L.I. (Cohen)
65-58710	04-04-64	05-23-64	" " "
65-58573	01-19-64	02-22-64	Greenwich, Conn. (Bradley)
63-52243	04-05-63	03-15-64	Haverford, Pa. (Kimmich)
65-58782	06-05-64	04-10-65	Scarsdale, N.Y. (dead)
65-58882	03-28-64	06----65	Purchase, N.Y. "
65-58869	12-30-64	03-28-65	Atlantic Beach, L.I. (Cohen)
65-58906	01-10-65	10-31-65	Westwood, N.J. (dead)
65-58733	04-13-64	11-05-65	Norristown, Pa. (Middleton)
65-58831	12-16-64	12-26-65	Hobokus, N.J. (dead)
65-58808	12-05-64	01-20-66	Portchester, N.Y. (injured)
65-26491	02-07-66	03-23-66	Atlantic Beach, L.I. (Cohen)
65-58898	01-09-65	01-27-66	Harrison, N.Y. (dead)
56-92204	03-26-66	05-13-66	Hempstead, L.I. (dead)
56-91960	02-17-66	03-18-66	Fairfield, Conn. (Larsen)
65-26355	03-20-65	03-12-66	Syosset, L.I. (Taylor)
65-26388	04-14-65	04-05-66	Upper Montclair, N.J. (Frazier)
65-58567	01-17-64	06-11-66	Fairlawn, N.J. (Clayton)
65-58924	01-14-65	04----66	Brookville, L.I. (dead)
73-67888	04-06-66	04-22-66	Atlantic Beach, L.I. (Cohen)
65-58979	01-29-65	07-24-66	" " " "
56-92185	03-26-66	06-05-66	Farmingdale, L.I. (dead)
65-26278	01-19-66	07-18-66	Woodcliff Lake, N.J. (dead)

It is impossible to say that all the birds moving from Ridgewood to Long Island take the route at the upper end of the curve across a small part of Westchester County, thence across Long Island Sound to Long Island, but a study of the Metropolitan Area maps would make that route quite feasible. Recoveries in Syosset and Brookville, and perhaps even Farmingdale, would almost certainly have taken the Westchester County route. The birds going to Dick Cohen's station at Atlantic Beach may likely take that route also, as the alternative route would mean flying directly over New York City and parts of Queens or Brooklyn, which of course is not impossible, but perhaps less likely.

My records so far give no clues as to the post-breeding season southwestward movement down along the other side of the curve, but presumably flocks of House Finches must leave their Long Island nesting grounds along the other side of the ellipse and thence back to their winter grounds, as virtually none are in evidence in northern New Jersey from September to early December. If there were a reverse movement back across New Jersey (Bergen County area) along the spring curve, there would surely be many more

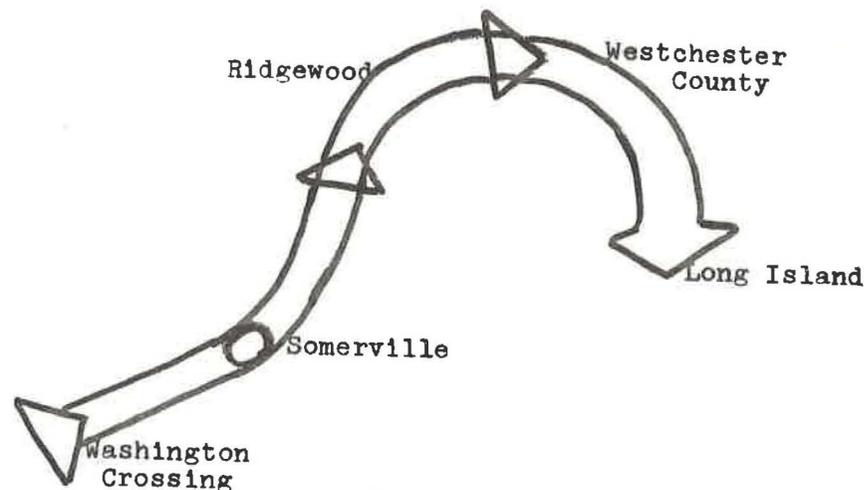
reports of sightings in the fall than there have been in the past. The late summer dispersal of the hundreds of House Finches which nested in this area is still a mystery. Do they backtrack, or do they move on over to Long Island after nesting (Dick Cohen reports some flying over in the fall, but not stopping at his station) and join the southwestward movement from there? Many more recovery records are needed for any proof of this post-breeding season movement.

Why So Many House Finches in Ridgewood?

A study of a topographical map of New Jersey provided the clue as to why so many hundreds, or thousands, of House Finches move through the Ridgewood area between January and April. (For some reason, not yet explained, other area banders capture very few.) The mountains of northern New Jersey very likely form a barrier which determines the probable route of constantly moving flocks. From foreign retrap records it would appear that many enter New Jersey from Pennsylvania in the area between Philadelphia and Washington Crossing, then move east-northeast, skirting mountains to the north, heading toward the general vicinity of Somerville (just north of New Brunswick) which is located at the edge of the First Watchung Mountain. From here the terrain to the northeast becomes less hilly, and they can proceed without interruption northeasterly up the narrow heavily populated corridor forming the eastern edge of New Jersey at that point. (This species is undoubtedly attracted to heavily populated areas with well-stocked feeding stations.) At the northern terminus of the Watchung range lies a comparatively flat area some fifteen miles in radius from New York City. Ridgewood lies at the northwestern edge of this area, just a short distance from the Ramapo Mountains. It is, therefore, a natural pivotal point on the upward curve of the House Finch migration. To go west they must cross mountains, to go north they must cross more mountains, but to the east and southeast it is comparatively open, and thus they seem to swing in that direction, some of them ultimately ending up at their ancestral nesting grounds on Long Island. Is it instinct that takes them back there, or is it simply a matter of physical barriers which turn them in that direction? (See Fig. 2.)

There will be some readers who will point out that from the Somerville/New Brunswick area large numbers of House Finches very likely proceed directly to Long Island, possible via Staten Island. This is undoubtedly true and perhaps particularly so for those that nest in the more central or eastern parts of Long Island. Other banders' records would have to prove this. All recoveries of my birds have been on the western end of the Island, so far.

Figure 2. Upper Curve of House Finch Migration



Recoveries of Ridgewood House Finches.

From the recoveries listed in Table 1, it is perhaps significant that the majority have been recovered to the east and southeast of Ridgewood, and in several cases within 30 days of banding. One discouraging fact is that of 2,000 House Finches banded here only 23 have been reported elsewhere and only 22 have returned to my station. That is a very small percentage for a species which travels in flocks within a narrow range and is easily attracted into banding stations. Of the 23 only 4 have been recovered locally, or within 5 miles of my banding station, and only one of these at another nearby station. In fact, my banding station which is just a small suburban backyard seems to be the only one in the area to get large numbers of House Finches. Am I more generous with sunflower seeds, or does Ridgewood lie, in fact, at the pivotal point of the northern movement which tends to deflect them from the banding stations just to the north and west in Allendale and Ramsey?

A Look at the Foreign Retraps. (See Table 2.)

A study of the foreign retraps would indicate that the birds banded in the early months of the winter are not necessarily the first to return north. In fact, studying the two groups which came in between March 25th and 30th, and between April 1st and 5th, would indicate that quite possibly

the birds from Virginia and Maryland form a loose flock association with those in eastern Pennsylvania and proceed up to their nesting ground together. Of the 9 foreign retraps during the last days of March (when I had 194 new bandings) 4 were from different Pennsylvania locations, 1 from Virginia, and 2 each from different locations in Maryland. They had not all been banded within a short period, but rather over a period of almost four months from late November to early March. In the first five days of

April (when I had 180 new bandings) 7 foreign retraps arrived, 6 from Pennsylvania and 1 from Maryland, but these had been originally banded over a shorter period from early November to early February. The 8 that came in after April 5th were from Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia and had been banded as early as November 10th and as late as March 27th. This latter was banded in Feasterville, which is near Washington Crossing, the point at which I feel many House Finches may enter New Jersey to avoid the northern mountain ranges.

The End of the Migration and Local Nesting.

As mentioned before, the January to March population here in Ridgewood is not static and apparently moves right on through. Careful observations in the area reveal a very small number, if any, banded birds at the active feeding stations in the vicinity, and a relative lack of repeats would bear this out also. (See Table 3.)

It is not until April that the number of repeats increases and that a nucleus of a local nesting population seems to be forming. At this time, also, the percentage of banded to unbanded birds increases somewhat, although until the end of April the unbanded birds outnumber the banded by a considerable margin. By the end of April some House Finches have already begun their nesting activities and by May the majority of birds can be presumed to be local nesters.

The last big flight of House Finches came in on April 20th (37 new bandings) and brought with it three foreign retraps, one each from Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, and the 22nd brought in one more Pennsylvania bird which was the last of the season and might also be considered the end of the migration. After that nearly 100 more were banded up through June, but these represented a local population and not migrants as such.

Table No. 2. House Finch Foreign Re-traps at Ridgewood

Band Number	Location of Banding	Date Banded	Date Re-trapped
31746	Mamaroneck, N.Y. (Cant)	08-27-58	03-25-59
42237	" " "	08-26-62	03-20-63
74923	Ardmore, Pa. (Marshall)	12-23-62	04-10-63
22864	" " "	12-28-63	03-12-64
22814	" " "	11-17-63	03-27-64
61038	Cedarhurst, L.I. (Cohen)	05-27-64	01-13-65
23775	Norristown, Pa. (Middleton)	02-12-64	01-31-65 *
23819	Chevy Chase, Md. (Arnold)	03-14-65	04-14-65
55586	Washington Crossing, Pa.	01-10-65	01-01-66 **
97591	Fairfield, Conn. (Larsen)	09-09-65	02-14-66
11661	Ardmore, Pa. (Marshall)	11-07-65	03-05-66
70376	Feasterville, Pa. (Walden)	01-09-66	03-11-66 ***
49026	Norristown, Pa. (Middleton)	11-25-65	03-25-66
18651	Anneslie, Md. (Lubbert)	01-27-66	03-26-66
74135	Owings Mills, Md. (Clark)	01-12-66	03-26-66
12363	West Chester, Pa. (Bernard)	02-05-66	03-26-66
18723	Anneslie, Md. (Lubbert)	03-07-66	03-28-66
74172	Owings Mills, Md. (Clark)	02-06-66	"
55537	Gordonsville, Va. (Babcock)	02-22-66	"
11668	Ardmore, Pa. (Marshall)	11-14-65	03-30-66
73649	Huntingdon Valley, Pa. (Reichel)	01-09-66	03-30-66
12332	West Chester, Pa. (Bernard)	01-09-66	04-01-66
21585	Phoenixville, Pa. (Trout)	11-10-65	"
70287	Feasterville, Pa. (Walden)	12-26-65	04-02-66
27446	Ardmore, Pa. (Marshall)	01-15-66	04-04-66
74170	Owings Mills, Md. (Clark)	02-12-66	"
99879	West Chester, Pa. (Bernard)	01-03-66	"
91894	Strafford, Pa. (McSarley)	12-29-65	04-05-66
21595	Phoenixville, Pa. (Trout)	11-10-65	04-06-66
30072	Feasterville, Pa. (Walden)	03-27-66	04-12-66
28720	Ardmore, Pa. (Marshall)	02-27-66	04-13-66
30049	Feasterville, Pa. (Walden)	03-13-66	"
99875	West Chester, Pa. (Bernard)	01-02-66	04-20-66
70601	Chevy Chase, Md. (Arnold)	03-12-66	" ****
55496	Gordonsville, Va. (Babcock)	02-15-66	"
21654	Phoenixville, Pa. (Trout)	01-09-66	04-22-66

* Repeated 04-19-65

** " 02-11-66/06-08-66

*** " 03-25-66/03-29-66

**** " 05-09-66

Table No. 3 House Finch Returns and Repeats for Spring 1966

	Jan. 1-15	Jan. 16-31	Feb. 1-15	Feb. 16-28	Mar. 1-15	Mar. 16-31	Apr. 1-15	Apr. 16-30	May 1-15	May 16-31
New Bandings	25	68	116	61	55	222	350	92	16	10
Repeats	0	8	7	8	5	5	47	25	2	3
Returns	1	1	2	3	0	2	1	0	0	0

House Finches have nested in the Ridgewood area for several years, but 1966 saw a tremendous increase. All over town in May and June they could be heard singing, even in the very center of the business district sitting on building ledges and on TV antennas on the roofs of buildings.

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MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Best news (from the Editor's point of view) is that EBBA News co-editor Frank P. Frazier, Jr. arrives home as this issue goes to press -- after nearly five years in Peru.

Both of your Editors wish to thank our regular contributors, as the year draws to a close: Dorothy Bordner, whose drawings and headings highlight every issue; Mabel Gillespie, whose book pages point the way towards acquiring more useful information; Ralph Bell, whose diary not only tells us how one bander operates but also gives us ideas on how to make our own banding activities more meaningful (and, of course, Carol Rudy, whose drawings head the Diary); Mary Schmid, whose meticulous indexing keeps us aware of where to find that elusive item we saw in EBBA News.

And we should like to name all the members who have contributed articles, pictures, advice and encouragement -- but they are legion, so we hope that they will sense our heartfelt gratitude.

And now, a Merry Christmas to you all! - and many cheery wishes for good banding, good health and a generous portion of the good things of life in 1967 and the years to come.