

AGEING HOUSE FINCHES BY WING COVERT WEAR - Donald F. Mott

(Reprinted from Western Bird Bander 45(3):36-37. We thank Mrs. Donald F. Radke, Editor of the Western Bird Banding Association for allowing us to reprint this paper. We are reprinting this in order to present another view on this subject. For additional reading, we suggest you reread Mrs. Elinor McEntee's paper on p. 70-76 of EBBA News, V. 33, No. 2 (March-April 1970), entitled: "Age determination of House Finches by plumage change").

Editor

From 1964 through 1969, biologists of the Denver Wildlife Research Center trapped and banded more than 11,000 House Finches (Carpodacus mexicanus) near Portland, Oregon. The majority were caught during and immediately after the breeding season, i.e., between 1 June and 30 September. Hatching-year House Finches, after losing natal down, and adult females were difficult to separate and were usually recorded as being of unknown age and sex. Two reliable techniques used to distinguish adults from hatching-year birds, both based on skull ossification, have been reported by Miller (Bird-Banding 17 (1): 33-35, 1946) and Norris (Bird-Banding 32: 55-57, 1961). However, neither proved practical when handling large numbers of birds as in our case. In 1968 the following method was found to separate these two age classes. It worked flawlessly in this area from the time the young had fledged until early fall when the post nuptial molt was completed by some adults.

Observations revealed that the edges of the secondary coverts of the adult Finches before completion of the postnuptial molt are worn and whitish, whereas those of the hatching-year Finches are unworn and buffy. This wear gives the appearance of a very thin white border on the secondary coverts of the adult as compared to the buffy, wider margin on the coverts of the hatching-year Finch (Figure 1). This difference is readily evident and with a little practice it becomes quick and easy to note.

According to Michener and Michener (Condor 42(2):140-153, 1940), the post-nuptial molt in House Finches lasts approximately 105 days and has been observed in progress from 15 May to 10 November in the Pasadena region of California. An adult female captured on 4 September 1968 in western Oregon still displayed the worn covert characteristic, but an adult male captured on 27 September 1968 had already completed the post-nuptial molt and was indistinguishable from hatching-year birds by the aforementioned feather characteristics. Using skull ossification as a check, 170 House Finches were aged without error by using the wing covert wear technique from 11 September to 25 September 1968.

I believe the wing covert wear to be a quick and reliable method for ageing House Finches in western Oregon from the breeding season through August. In September the possibility of confusing mixed age classes exists, as a few completely molted adults may then be present. At this time of year "skulling" can be employed to separate definite immatures; all others should probably be classified as unknown age since some skulls from early hatching Finches could be approaching complete ossification.

Figure 1 - House Finch Wings

- A. Hatching-year bird, with unworn buffy edges of upper wing coverts.
B. Adult bird during breeding season (Western U.S.) with worn white edges of upper wing coverts.
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