

## ORIGIN AND STATUS OF THE HOUSE FINCH IN THE EASTERN UNITED STATES

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ON January 17, 1948, at Hewlett, Nassau County, Long Island, New York, an adult male House Finch, *Carpodacus mexicanus*, was collected by Arbib from a flock of 40 or more birds. This specimen (now No. 348793, Amer. Mus. Nat. Hist.) was the first House Finch collected in the eastern United States, and it proved that the species had been correctly identified as a resident—indeed, a breeding bird on Long Island—an assertion that had been maintained in the face of some skepticism during the previous five years.

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### HISTORY

The known history of the House Finch in the eastern United States begins with the first published record east of the great plains. This involved a highly-colored male bird discovered at Jones Beach, Long Island, on April 11, 1941, by Richard B. Fischer and Robert Hines. This record was published in a weekly column on local ornithology edited by Elliott and appearing in the 'Nassau Daily Review-Star,' a newspaper (Rockville Centre, N. Y., April 23, 1941). The bird was subsequently seen and heard on April 15, 17, and 20, 1941, by numerous observers, this being the only record from Jones Beach.

About a year later, in March, 1942, Elliott found seven House Finches in the vicinity of a tree nursery at Babylon, Long Island (about 12 miles northeast of Jones Beach) and lists the following records from that area: summer of 1942—small colony found on nursery grounds with several males singing from the tops of ornamental evergreens; summer of 1943—about a dozen birds present. On May 28, 1943, a nest with four young was found. This is the first recorded nesting in the area; July, 1944—about 18 birds present, and young being fed at perches on electric wires.

Numbers increased to 24 in 1945 and to 38 in 1946. One evening in late summer of 1947 a flock, closely estimated at 50 individuals, flew into the Babylon nursery area. In 1947-48, after a heavy snowfall, the Babylon colony seemed reduced to a very few birds; none could be found for a month, although previously they wintered there.

There were, however, several dozen birds in the summer of 1948, and these increased to 70 by the winter of 1949-50. At the time of the absence at Babylon in 1947-48, large increases were noted at Hewlett (23 miles west) and at Lawrence (26 miles west) where other colonies had definitely been known to exist since 1944, and possibly had existed earlier. At Westbury (12 miles northeast of Hewlett) House Finches were found in a large nursery in 1944, and these increased to several dozen in 1948, with young noted from 1945 on.

At this writing, the four colonies mentioned are all thriving, with slight increases indicated over the populations of 1949. In the last two years, increasingly frequent records have been obtained outside the Babylon-Westbury-Lawrence triangle, evidence of peripheral spread. Long Island locations include Riis Park, Idlewild, Williston, Roslyn, and Wyandanch. On May 18, 1948, the first unimpeachable record of a House Finch from off the island was made at Tarrytown, New York, by Lester Walsh, and there are subsequent records from Ridgewood, New Jersey (1949) and Bedford and Armonk, New York (1951). During the winter of 1951-52 a small colony (20-30 birds) was found along the Long Island shore in Greenwich Township, Connecticut.

#### ORIGIN

In May, 1947, Elliott wrote a brief summary of the status of the House Finch on Long Island (*Linnaean News-Letter*, 1 (3): 2). At that time there was no clue as to how the species had come into the East, why it had not been noted in other parts of the continent outside its normal range, and why all known colonies were concentrated on Long Island. Several theories were advanced, including the escape of cage birds, deliberate planting, and the possibility that some birds may have been inadvertently trapped in freight car shipments of nursery plants from the West. It seemed impossible that a characteristically sedentary, or at best only locally migratory species should suddenly appear in numbers, of its own volition, some 1,500 miles from its normal range without a single record from intervening areas.

An answer was immediately forthcoming, which at first seemed to solve the riddle of the birds' appearance, though it subsequently raised several corollary problems. The answer came from Dr. Edward Fleisher, of Brooklyn. Fleisher (*Linnaean News-Letter*, 1 (4): 1-2)

wrote that in January, 1940, he had discovered in a bird store in Brooklyn a large cage with 20 House Finches for sale as "Hollywood Finches." He had previously seen Bohemian Waxwings for sale in this store, and decided to put an end to this traffic in protected American passerines. In Fleisher's words:

"I accordingly wrote to the National Audubon Society asking them to take some action. Mr. Richard Pough, who handled such matters, was out of town, and the case was referred to the State Game Protector of this district. I received, through the kindness of Carl W. Buchheister, a copy of this official's reply. In it he stated that the birds were sold by an aviary in California, and he intimated that the sale was not illegal because 'the species is not protected in California nor is it native to New York State.' . . . On March 14, 1940, I wrote to the then Bureau of Biological Survey and received a reply signed by Chester A. Liechhardt, Acting Chief of the Division of Game Management. In this letter, I was informed that House Finches were placed on the list of migratory birds following the convention between the United States of America and the United Mexican States, and hence their trapping and sale without a federal permit constitute violations of the law . . .

Shortly thereafter I was visited by Mr. Orin D. Steele, U. S. Game Management Agent. In answer to one of his questions I strongly opposed releasing these birds in this area, and asked that they be disposed of in some other manner. A few days later, April 1, 1940, Mr. Steele sent me a letter in which he said 'based entirely on information furnished by you, we have been able to stop the trapping and transportation from California, and have stopped sales throughout the United States.'

Fleisher's report of his campaign is quoted at length because it puts on record the names of those most responsible for ending this illegal traffic, and because it illustrates the rewards of constant vigilance.

Meanwhile, the National Audubon Society had taken action locally. Pough had telephoned to 20 local dealers, and found that all carried the species, or had carried it at some time during the four years the treaty had been in effect. Three dealers said they "no longer carried House Finches . . . because they were too cheap . . . and because they were too wild and did not live long in captivity." Most of the local bird shops were supplied by one wholesaler, who confided to Pough that there was some present trouble about the legality of their sale, and until the matter was straightened out, he could not supply. He thought that in a week or two he could start shipping. He quoted a price of \$35 per hundred. He said they would probably get around the difficulty by calling the birds Purple Finches, since, he said, these birds were not protected by the Mexican treaty.

In seeking to trace this illegal traffic, the authors canvassed bird shippers known to have engaged in trapping House Finches. Some were no longer in business, others refused to answer, but several replies were informative, and revealed an unsuspected magnitude of the operation. One shipper, located at Reseda, Los Angeles County,

California, stated that he had ceased shipping House Finches, known to the trade as "Red-headed Linnets" in 1936, but that many thousands of these birds were shipped by him and almost every other dealer to nearly every state east of the Mississippi. He stated that they were shipped so fast that the State Fish and Game Department put a ban on further shipments. (This may have been the ban imposed in 1940.) To quote him: "Some of the shippers shipped them regardless of the ban, but gave them different names. It is still unlawful to ship these linnets but some of the dealers still ship them under various names. Only about 100 females were shipped to every 1,000 males, the males being the colored ones. They used to breed these males to female canaries. The amount shipped must have run into many thousands but no one can tell just how many. My guess would be about 100,000 or more. No birds were returned to California as they had no value here."

Although this information is admittedly unverifiable, there is no reason to doubt its general theme—that many thousands of House Finches were shipped to many eastern states from California by many shippers during a period of years, which practice may still be carried on to a minor degree. And circumstantial evidence, at least, indicates that the surplus unsalable birds were released, perhaps by a single New York bird dealer, when the ban was effected in 1940.

There is no evidence that the Long Island population is the result of a *Carpodacus-Serinus* cross, but canary breeders consulted were unanimous in agreeing that it is possible, and point to a long list of successful hybridization with *Serinus* and other fringillid genera.

However, with all the evidence suggesting a California origin, it is noteworthy that the House Finches of Long Island appear, to all observers who have studied the bird in the field and then compared their impressions with museum specimens, to be extremely dark, dusky, and "smokier" than the average in California populations—indeed—than almost every other race of the species. This obvious duskiness proved baffling at first, and because the birds most closely resembled the populations of *Carpodacus mexicanus smithi* from Colorado and New Mexico, an entirely different explanation of their appearance on Long Island was sought. The possibility that the Long Island birds might be "sooted" was considered improbable, since the areas frequented by the House Finches on Long Island are suburban, close to the sea, non-industrial, and relatively clean. To date there has been little evidence of sooting in this area among other species with comparable habits.

Subsequent examinations of freshly collected specimens from Long Island, however, prove conclusively that these birds are heavily

sooted. In New York, Dean Amadon compared newly-collected, washed House Finches with earlier, unwashed specimens from Long Island, and found that the darker color of Long Island birds was attributable to dirt-stained plumage. In California, Alden H. Miller compared two specimens from Long Island with a large series in the collection of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology. He reported that he could match them perfectly with individuals taken in the spring in the San Joaquin Valley of California and in the Los Angeles area. At this time of year the House Finches from these California areas show a great degree of individual variation in the degree to which the browns and reds have faded and brightened, respectively. Most of the birds from these areas were lighter and brighter than the Long Island birds, but apparently some individuals, depending on local conditions of exposure, remain much darker than others. From these same areas were found birds that were so dirty that they were actually darker in appearance than the two washed Long Island birds. Miller also compared the Long Island birds with *smithi* from the Denver district, and concluded that even when sooted, *smithi* shows broader stripings in both male and female than California birds. His conclusion, which the authors accept, is that the Long Island birds are without doubt *C. m. frontalis*, from California.

#### HABITAT AND BEHAVIOR ON LONG ISLAND

In its native West, the House Finch is found in a wide variety of environments. Dawson (*Birds of Calif.*, 1: 214, 1923) speaks of its adaptability as being marvelous, and its success in its new eastern locale is perhaps further proof. According to Grinnell and Miller (*Pacific Coast Avif.*, no. 27: 454, 1944) the habitat in California is remarkably varied, with a great diversity of situations meeting the four apparent requirements of: 1) water within a fairly wide cruising radius; 2) open ground affording growths of low seed-producing plants; 3) fruits and berries during part of the year, these may also substitute for nearby water; 4) places for roosting and nesting above ground level. At all its eastern sites, these requirements are amply met. On Long Island, east of the Lawrence-Hewlett areas, the species resorts principally to ornamental shrub and tree plantations in and around nursery grounds. In the Lawrence-Hewlett area, it is found chiefly associated with cultured evergreens on old estates.

In the West, the House Finch often nests in outbuildings and around the eaves and porches of houses, on cliffs, in shrubs, trees, hedges, or cactus of any size or height. Thus far on Long Island, the House Finch has confined its nesting to hedges and to coniferous trees of

various heights. The first nest discovered on Long Island was well-concealed near the center of the foliage of a 30-inch Austrian pine, about 12 inches from the top; this was the above-mentioned Babylon nest. Other nests in Hewlett and Westbury have been placed in ornamental spruces at heights up to 30 feet. Another nest in Babylon was found in a hedge about five feet from the ground.

As in the West, the Long Island birds build their nests of whatever materials may be locally available. The Babylon nest, found in the Austrian pine, was constructed of coarse grasses which made the exterior bulky. The interior was lined with finer grasses and contained little or no thread, floss, down, or string, material often noted in western nests. A nest in Hewlett was woven of slender twigs and rootlets with a lining of fine grasses and spruce needles.

#### FOOD

In the East, the House Finch has not thus far been reported in any of the destructive feeding practices often condemned in California. Its primary items of diet are weed and grass seeds, and the seeds of *Cerastrium* (mouse-ear chickweed), but it has also been seen feeding on the fruits and berries of some flowering shrubs. In winter, besides eating the fruit of nursery shrubs, it feeds on *Rhus* (sumac) berries to some extent. During the coldest months, the birds gather in flocks, and especially in the Lawrence-Hewlett area, depend on food set out at feeding stations. Here they often remain until late spring (May) when food becomes otherwise available to them. At Babylon and Westbury feeding stations are not as numerous; this is perhaps the reason for the disappearance of the birds in the winter of 1947-48 in the Babylon area and the increase in numbers farther west.

At the feeding stations the preference is for sunflower seeds (the bait which the California trappers cited as most successful); but in the absence of this seed, hemp, millet, rape, and cracked corn are readily consumed.

#### PRESENT STATUS

The House Finch on Long Island is non-migratory, although given to local wandering in winter to procure food. During frequent visits birds were found consistently in the Babylon area from 1942 through 1946, even in winter, although there was a noticeable increase in individuals concentrated here prior to the nesting season of 1946. In the Lawrence-Hewlett area the birds seem to gather in the winter into cohesive flocks, although there is considerable trading back and forth between nearby feeding stations, and almost daily variation in the number of visitors at the numerous feeding stations in the area.

The future prospects of the species in this region seem favorable. All four original groups are thriving and increasing in numbers, although more slowly than in the first few years. The increasing number of observations from outlying locations is further evidence of a growing population. The present (1951) population is estimated roughly at 280 individuals, as follows: Babylon, 70; Westbury, 35; Lawrence, 30; Hewlett, 90; scattered, 25; Connecticut, 30.

Ecologically there appears to be little or no conflict with other species. Thus far, its breeding grounds are not contiguous with those of the Purple Finch, *Carpodacus purpureus*, and since the Purple Finch does not normally remain throughout the winter, there is no competition for food at this season. It is not yet a competitor of the House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus*, except at the feeding trays, where, if anything, the House Finch is dominant and aggressive. Thus far there is no competition for breeding territory.

It may be that the species is entirely dependent on man's largess for its winter survival, but this in itself, while it might be a limiting factor, is no danger, since the feeding station is an increasing phenomenon in the region. The birds have survived several heavy snowstorms, but thus far have not been tested by any winter of prolonged severity. From the evidence, it would appear that this adaptable and colorful bird is a securely established resident of the Eastern United States.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The House Finch, *Carpodacus mexicanus*, is now a resident species in the Eastern United States, with an estimated population (1951) of 280 individuals, located almost entirely in southern Nassau County, Long Island, New York, and in Greenwich Township, Connecticut.

The first published record was for April 11, 1941, and the first collected specimen was taken January 17, 1948. The first nest was found in May, 1943.

The origin of the House Finch in the East appears to be in the release of caged birds by bird dealers following a ban on their sale commercially, enforced early in 1940. These caged birds had been trapped in California and shipped east in quantities during the preceding ten years.

The Long Island birds appear in the field to be extremely dark and dusky; but this appearance is caused by sooting, and washed specimens are identical with specimens of *Carpodacus m. frontalis* from California.

The habitat, behavior, and prospects for the species in the East are discussed.

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