THE SEASONAL OCCURRENCE OF ROSY FINCHES AT JUNEAU, ALASKA

By RALPH B. WILLIAMS

From March 22 through April 3, 1948, the writer trapped and banded a total of 306 Rosy Finches (*Leucosticte tephrocotis*) at an elevation of 200 feet above the Gastineau Channel in the residential district of Juneau, Alaska. No specimens were collected for identification, because this is one of the few instances where subspecies can be distinguished in the field. Six of the total were of the race *L. t. tephrocotis*; the remainder were *L. t. littoralis*. Search in the available literature failed to bring to light any data on the occurrence of the subspecies *tephrocotis* in the Alexander Archipelago. There are several records of *littoralis*.

My experience with Rosy Finches dates back to residence in Utah and Wyoming, where I encountered them during the winter in the lowlands and on the prairies. The method used in capturing these birds in Wyoming consisted in exploiting their habit of resorting to the enclosed nests of Cliff Swallows for winter roosting. I plugged the nest openings with non-absorbent cotton at an early hour before dawn. At daybreak, I held a sack net a few inches below the openings and removed the cotton plug. The occupants were captured as they flew out and were banded.

My notes on the birds of southeastern Alaska show that the first Rosy Finches encountered here, all referrable to the subspecies *littoralis*, were observed on March 10, 1945. Rosy Finches are not seen about the towns or along the beaches of the numerous, intricate waterways of southeastern Alaska during the fall season. Many of the local birds and species from the north and west move southward during the closing days of August, in what is called locally the "mountain-top migrations."

During the spring migration of 1946, no Rosy Finches were recorded by the author at Juneau. A few thought to be summer residents were seen at various times on the lofty serrate peaks of bare rock, talus slopes and gigantic cliffs of glacial origin east and north of Gastineau Channel during the summer months. Rosy Finches that take up summer residence in southeastern Alaska choose for their breeding habitat the most inaccessible parts of the coastal mountains that lie along the international boundary between southeastern Alaska and adjacent Canada. Among the cracks and crannies of the glaciated cliffs of rugged peaks, just along the line of permanent snow, this subspecies selects its nesting sites.

On April 5, 1947, the first returning migrants, all referrable to *littoralis*, were seen feeding in a compact mass of from 50 to 60 individuals on the lawn behind the Governor's mansion at Juneau. They were so tame that one could walk almost into the center of the flock without causing it to take wing. Once disturbed, the flock would settle again, almost immediately, and continue feeding among the dry grasses swept clean of snow by the Taku wind. The next day, from 150 to 200 finches were seen in flight up Gold Creek toward Evergreen Bowl. These birds remained common in the vicinity of Juneau for the greater part of two weeks.

The finches were next encountered on October 19, 1947, at an altitude of approximately 3800 feet, on Mount McGinnis (altitude 4250 feet). My party was well above timberline when it began to snow with blizzard-like fury, and as we topped one of the higher ridges the snowy sky was literally filled with chirping birds. After a few moments the snow ceased, the winds died to breeze velocity, and the birds coming to rest on the windswept tundra plants of this high ridge all proved to be Rosy Finches referrable to *littoralis*. They were very tame, scarcely giving way as we continued upward.

The first spring migrants observed by me during the 1948 season consisted of a large flock of over 200 Rosy Finches, seen near the waterfront of Juneau on February 11, 1948. A few flocks of from 25 to 100 individuals were observed daily, especially near the Governor's mansion and on Gold Belt Hill.

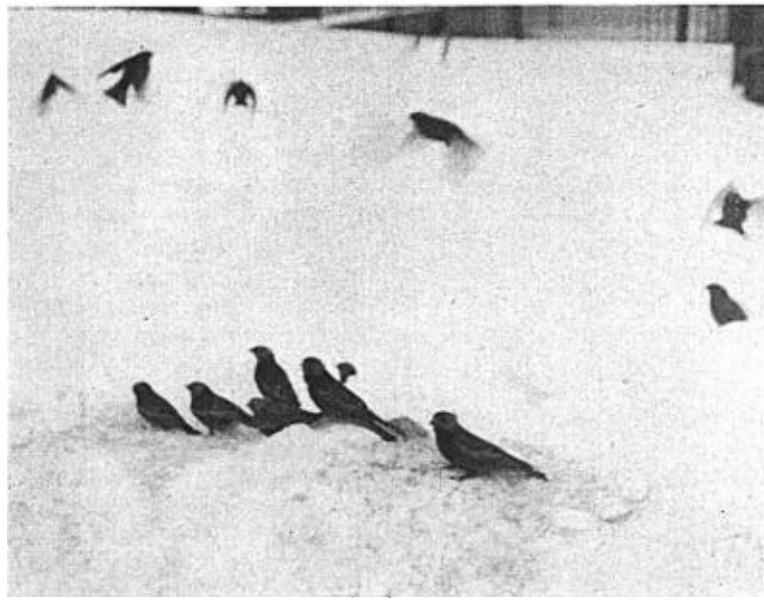

Fig. 6. Rosy Finches feeding on seeds near banding area, Juneau, Alaska, April 2, 1948.

During a single storm lasting from March 19 to 21, 32.5 inches of snow fell; this together with the snow already present blanketed the ground to depths of 3 to 4 feet in many places. It is my opinion that the heavy snows resulted in an exceptional concentration of Rosy Finches, Oregon Juncos (*Junco oreganus*), Varied Thrushes (*Ixoreus naevius*) with a few Robins (*Turdus migratorius*) and Bohemian Waxwings (*Bombycilla garrula*).

A Juneau resident fed the birds with canary seed at approximately 7 a.m. daily. When the first birds flew down to feed on seeds broadcast on the snow, others were seen coming from all directions. The concentrations resulting from the mad rush for the seeds resembled swarms of giant bees as the flocks swirled over the snow; an occasional member would fly up here and there, only to settle once again into the mass of moving birds. The flocks collectively totaled well over 1000 individuals.

After such a feeding, the flock would break up into smaller groups and these would scatter to several other feeding stations, where canary seeds were made available at various intervals between the earlier feeding and 9 a.m. Later in the day, a portion of the flock visited the wharfs where longshoremen had also taken to providing food. Other portions spread out over the mountain sides, to gather the Sitka spruce nutlets which had been shaken out and broadcast by the violence of the Taku wind. At the time, spruce trees of this section were heavily burdened with ripe cones. The wind had scattered large quantities of the nutlets over a considerable area shortly after the snow stopped falling, and in my opinion, these would have provided an adequate food supply for the migrants had no feeding stations at all been established by local people.

I took advantage of the concentrations on March 22, and during this first day of banding operations I observed individuals referrable to the subspecies *tephrocotis*. Two of these birds were trapped, banded, and released after careful inspection. The final results of the day's banding totaled 107 birds. Of this number 104 were *littoralis*, 2 were *tephrocotis* and 1 was *Junco oreganus oreganus*.

Banding operations were resumed on April 1 and continued through April 3. On April 1, 99 *littoralis*, 1 *tephrocotis* and 2 *Junco oreganus oreganus* were banded. On April 2, 29 *littoralis* and 3 *tephrocotis* were trapped during the morning. The final 68 *littoralis* were trapped and banded on April 3, bringing the total to 309 birds.

During operations it was noted that well over 1000 birds referrable to *littoralis* were present, while among this number it was estimated there were from 20 to 25 birds typical of the subspecies *tephrocotis*. The storm of March 19-21 was followed by bright days, with many hours of warm sunshine and freezing nights. This period of sunny days continued through April 14, by which time the concentration had dispersed into smaller flocks. On April 10, 1948, the last small flock of Rosy Finches was seen near Gold Creek.

It may be concluded that the subspecies *littoralis* is the usual Rosy Finch in southeastern Alaska, with stragglers of the subspecies *tephrocotis* ranging into this area from interior Alaska and adjacent Canada.

Juneau, Alaska, July 13, 1948.