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THE PRACTICED EYE

Text and Illustrations by Kenn Kaufman

Notes on Goldfinch Identification

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OVER MUCH OF THE CONTINENT, from southern Canada to northern Mexico, the American Goldfinch (*Carduelis tristis*) is among the most familiar birds, in summer or winter or both. Because it is featured in all the beginners' books on birds, it tends to be quickly learned, and then largely ignored.

In eastern North America, how much time do birders spend actually looking at flocks of goldfinches? Very little, I suspect. The flock may get a quick scan for Pine Siskins (*C. pinus*), and then the birder moves on to look for something more "interesting." But American Goldfinches are worthy of close study, because they demonstrate some important things about variation in birds.

In a series of birding workshops that I've been teaching, one of our field exercises has involved looking at the variability of individual birds in a flock. A winter mob of American Goldfinches makes a good focus for such an attempt. The active little finches may swirl like snowflakes around the weed stalks or feeders, but if you concentrate enough to see details, you realize that they're like snowflakes in another way: No two are exactly alike. The yellow about the face may be bright or dull, extensive or limited or nonexistent. The body plumage may be anything from brown to gray. The wings may be black or dark gray or brown, with wing bars of white or yellow or rich golden buff. Much of this has to do with age and gender; for example, adult males tend to have blacker wings and more yellow around the face. But a lot of it merely reflects the individual variation shown by every species of bird, variation that we all too often ignore.

Spring is a particularly good time for looking closely at American Goldfinches, because they are changing feathers, going through a molt. (Some individuals may not finish their "spring" molt until July—probably birds that will start nesting activity in late summer.) This is the prealternate molt, and it creates striking change in the males, who go from the drab basic tones of winter to bright golden alternate plumage of summer.

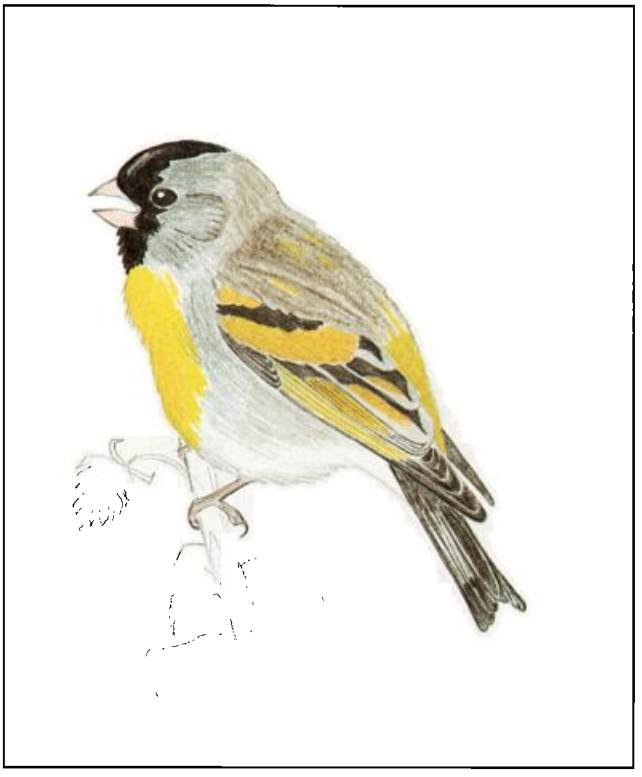

Figure 1. A male Lawrence's Goldfinch singing. All three of our goldfinch species have complicated songs; Lawrence's and Lesser goldfinches vary theirs by appropriating ("mimicking") notes from other birds.

Figure 2. Female-plumaged American and Lawrence's goldfinches. Left: Adult female American Goldfinch in winter. Center: Adult female American Goldfinch in mid-summer. American Goldfinch shows more seasonal change in appearance than the other two species. The male's change from golden alternate plumage (summer) to the softer tones of basic plumage (winter) is well known, but females are also much brighter yellow in summer than in winter. Right: adult female Lawrence's Goldfinch in fresh plumage (winter). The bright yellow in the wings should be enough to distinguish this species from the other two; however, many American Goldfinches in fall and winter have wing-bars of deep golden buff.

Females are molting at the same time. They do not change colors as obviously as the males, but there is a distinct difference between their brown and gray basic plumage and their more yellow and green alternate plumage of summer.

The pattern of molt in this species is similar to that of many other birds. The spring (prealternate) molt of goldfinches is only partial; they replace head and body feathers, but not the flight feathers of the wings and tail. Then in fall, they go through a complete prebasic molt, replacing all their feathers, including the flight feathers. (This gives them more strikingly patterned wings in winter, because the wing feathers are fresher then.) The clear difference between their summer and winter colors makes the molt noticeable. Watching for signs of molt in American Goldfinches will help you to understand the phenomenon in other, more subtle, species.

Birders in the west may look at goldfinches a bit more carefully, if only because there are three species there. The Lesser Goldfinch (*C. psaltria*) is actually far more widespread than the American Goldfinch, since its range extends south to Peru. North of the Mexican border, though, it is a western/southwestern specialty.

In the northern part of its range in

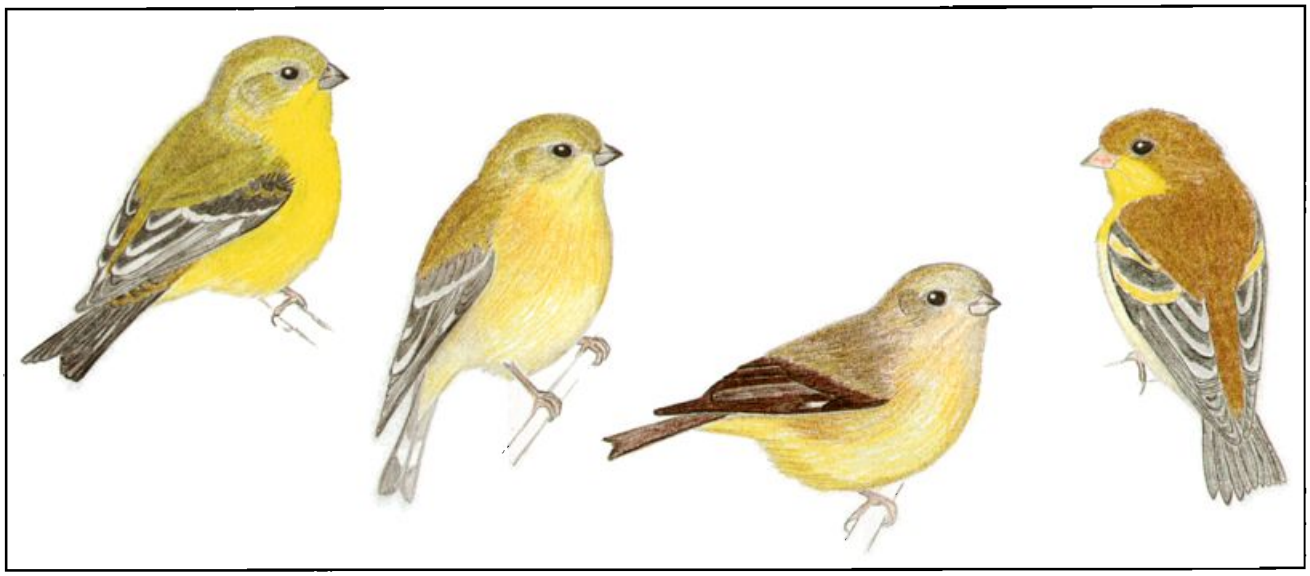

Figure 3. Female-plumaged Lesser Goldfinches, to show individual and seasonal variation. Left: typical adult female in fresh plumage (winter). Second from left: some females are atypically pale even in fresh plumage. Their undertail coverts may be so pale as to appear almost white, thus nullifying one of the best field marks for distinguishing Lesser from American. Tail pattern (see Figure 5) remains a consistent distinction for these problem birds. Third from left: a female Lesser in mid-summer, in very worn plumage. Such birds can look exceptionally dull, and may be identifiable mainly by their small size, bill shape, and characteristic callnotes. Right: a young bird, not long out of the nest. In this very fresh juvenal plumage, the wing-bars are broad and well-defined. The Lesser Goldfinch has a long breeding season in warmer regions, so juveniles may be seen over much of the year.

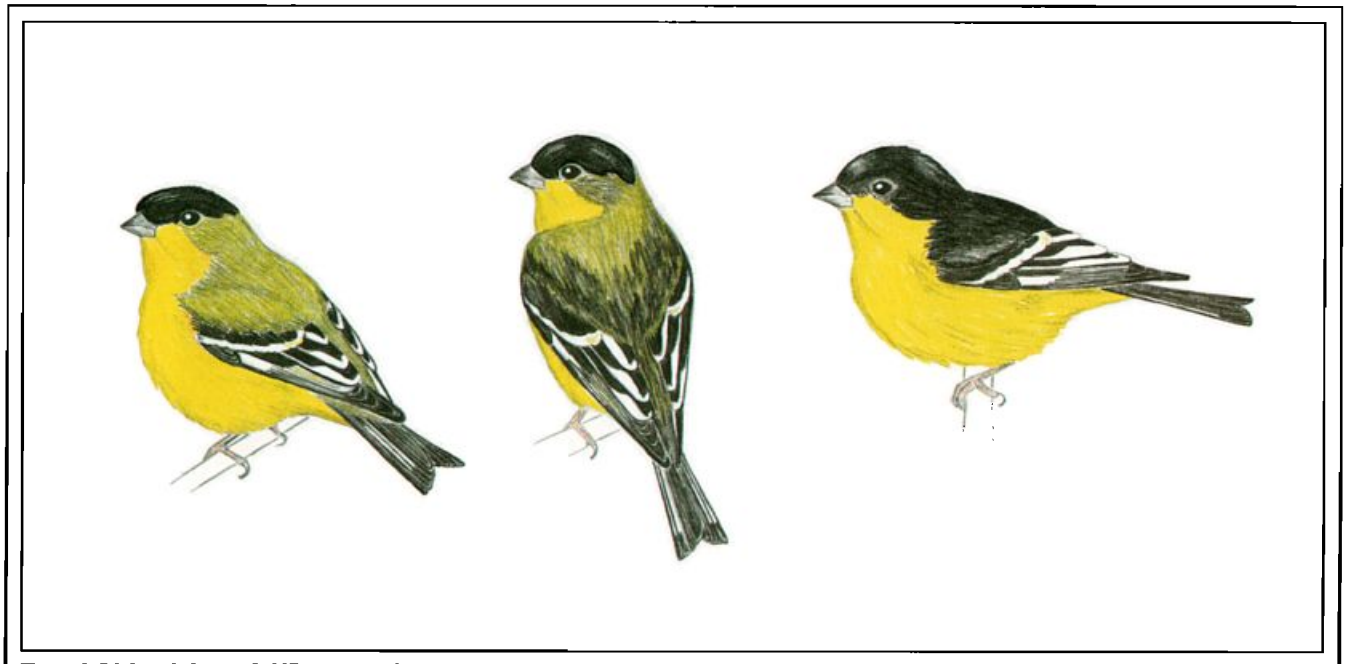

Figure 4. Adult male Lesser Goldfinches vary from green-backed to black-backed forms in different parts of the species' wide range. Left: typical green-backed form, found over most of the western part of the range within the United States. Right: typical black-backed form, found farther east and south. Center: an intermediate bird, of a type often found in Colorado and New Mexico. See text for comments on the taxonomic status of these different-looking birds.

the interior, from Colorado and northern New Mexico to northeastern California, the Lesser Goldfinch is mainly a summer resident. Birders trying to find them there in winter (e.g., for Christmas Bird Counts) may run afoul of the great variation in American Goldfinches, which flood into these same areas during the cold months.

Color of the undertail coverts—white in American, yellow in Lesser—is usually a sufficient field mark for separating them. Some Lessers are very pale, however, and some Americans can look tinged with yellow under the tail (especially in low-angle sunlight near sunrise or sunset), so it's unwise to rely completely on this one item.

Wing pattern provides an additional clue. In winter, Lessers usually have narrower wing bars than American Goldfinches. Lessers also show a squarish white patch in the wing (at the base of the primaries), in the same position as the well-known wing mark of the Black-throated Blue Warbler (*Dendroica caerulescens*). This white square can be obscure in some young females. The American Goldfinch has white edgings to the primaries in the same general area, but not a well-defined squarish patch of white.

Tail pattern is also an important distinction, as shown in Figure 5. The white on the American Goldfinch extends out to the tips of the tail feathers. On the Lesser Goldfinch, the white (if present) is centered on each tail feather, and the tip of the tail is dark. This difference can be seen even on birds going away from you, with their tails spread in flight. Some female Lessers show no white in the tail at all, and this lack of pattern helps to emphasize the tiny, short-tailed structure of the bird.

The Lesser Goldfinch shows less seasonal variation than the American Goldfinch.

The Lesser Goldfinch shows less seasonal variation than the American Goldfinch. (Its molt is just as extensive, but its summer and winter plumages are colored the same.) But geographic variation is noticeable in males: The nape and upper back may be either black or green (or a mixture of the two colors). Many birders have the unfortunate idea that they will seem more erudite if they slap subspecific names on the birds they see, and these goldfinch forms make tempting targets. So the green-backed males found from Arizona and Utah west to the Pacific Coast are often called *hesperophilus*, while black-backed birds found farther east are often called *psaltria*. However, the situation is not really that simple. In Colorado and New Mexico, at least, black back color may represent only a color morph. Many males in that region are green-backed, and many others turn out to have a mixture of black and green if they are observed closely. Furthermore, black-backed males crop up occasionally farther west, even as part of the nesting population in central Arizona. A different race may be involved farther south, where all the males are black-backed, but it's pointless for field observers to apply subspecific names to any Lesser Goldfinches seen in the United States.

If the American Goldfinch is one of our best-known birds, its relative, the Lawrence's Goldfinch (*C. lawrencei*), is among the most poorly

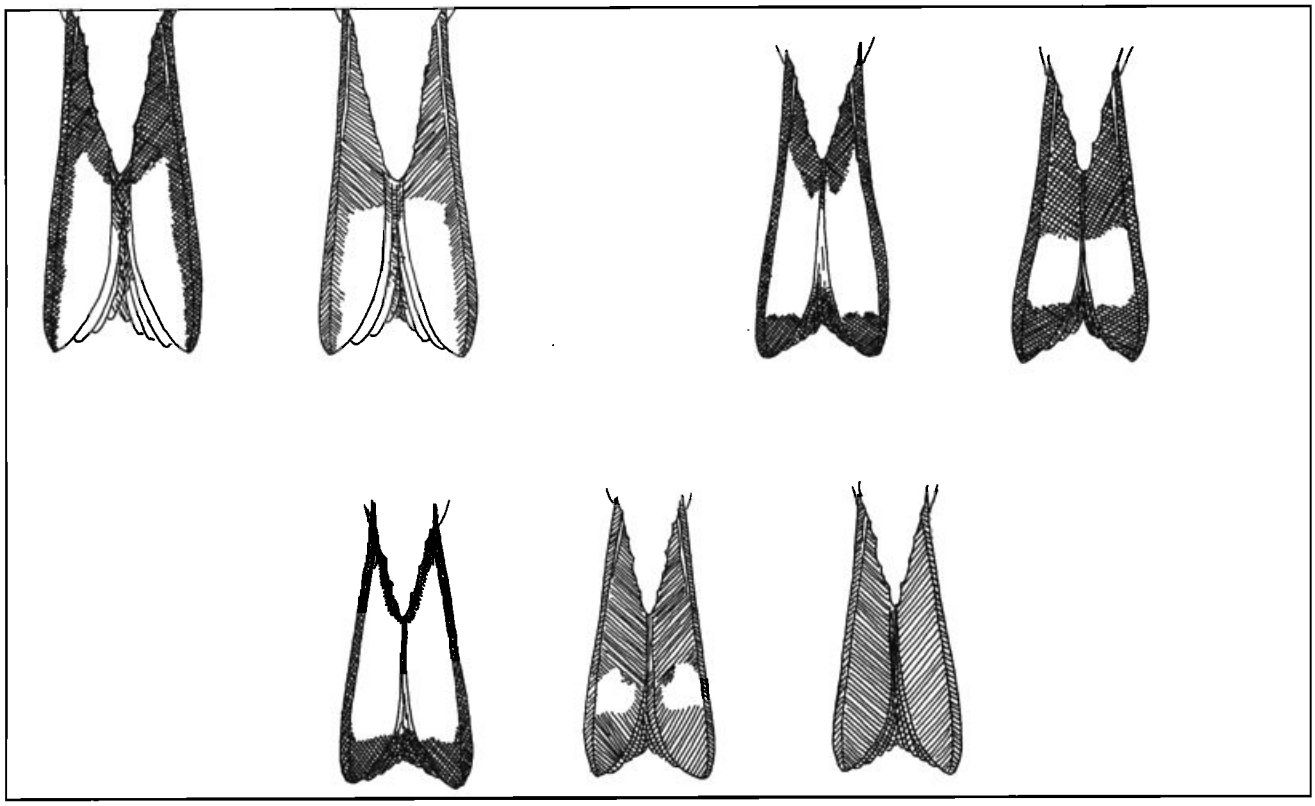

Figure 5. Tail patterns of goldfinches, as seen from below. Top row, left: Adult male American Goldfinch. Second from left: adult female American Goldfinch. The white spots on the inner webs of the outer tail feathers extend all the way to the tips. Top row, third from left: adult male Lawrence's Goldfinch. Right: female Lawrence's Goldfinch with minimal white. Tail pattern is similar to that of Lesser Goldfinch but seems to be far less variable. Bottom row: Lesser Goldfinch, three variations. The one at left is typical of adult males. Females often have a pattern like that shown at center, but many (especially younger birds?) show no white in the tail at all.

known. This elegant and enigmatic finch is a very local breeder in the foothills of California and Baja. Migratory and nomadic, it disappears from many of its breeding areas in winter, but it often seems to do so without showing up anywhere else!

Although each tends to flock with its own kind, lone individuals often will join a flock of a different goldfinch species.

In other winters, flocks of Lawrence's Goldfinches liven the landscape across southern Arizona, into New Mexico and occasionally farther. These invasions may cover hundreds of miles, rivalling the better-known flights of "winter finches" in eastern Canada and the northeastern United States.

The Lawrence's Goldfinch rarely presents any challenge in identification, if seen well. Its wing pattern, particularly the yellow at the bases of the flight feathers, should preclude confusion with the other two species. A lone female, perching up and directly facing the observer, could be confused with a winter female American Goldfinch—were it not for the big difference in tail patterns. Lawrence's has white patches in the tail similar to those of the male Lesser Goldfinch. Unlike Lesser, however, Lawrence's shows little variation in tail pattern. The white may be somewhat less extensive in females, but it seems to be rarely, if ever, lacking altogether.

All of our species of *Carduelis* are prone to wander. The Lesser Goldfinch has been found a few times east of the Great Plains, and there is a possible record of Lawrence's Goldfinch as far east as Louisiana. Although each tends to flock with its own kind, lone individuals often will join a flock of a different goldfinch species. If you are an observer in eastern North America, this is another reason to consider looking carefully at flocks of American Goldfinches. Not only will you get to study variation in these attractive birds, but you just might find some real rarity among them.

Acknowledgments

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