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Winter Finch Irruption "Superflight" Year Story

By Kent Miller

Watching birds is like a free treasure hunt you can do anytime, anywhere. This winter is shaping up to be full of more treasures than we've seen in our area in many years. These bonus treasures are nicknamed 'winter finches' because in places like Ohio we generally only see these finch-like species during the winter. And this winter we are seeing winter finches much earlier and more often than normal.

Winter finches include beauties like Evening Grosbeak, Common and Hoary Redpolls, Pine Siskin, White-winged and Red Crossbills, and Pine Grosbeak. These species are rather nomadic throughout their strongholds in Canada's boreal forests, roaming about in search of their favorite seed-bearing trees. But every few years the favored seed crop of one or two of these species crashes sending large numbers of those birds pouring south into the northern tier of states or even further south.

Even more exciting, once a decade or so (due to multiple seed crops crashing at once, weather, and some mysteries still unknown) all of the winter finches stream south in large numbers together causing what birders excitedly call a "super-flight". There was a decent super-flight in 2012-13 and an even better one in 1997-98. The numbers of winter finches seen moving into northern Ohio in the fall of 2020 leads many to believe 2020-21 could eclipse both of those super-flights.

The best way to experience this super-flight is at the feeders right at your home! Since all of these winter finches love seeds they can all be attracted to your home feeding station. So this is the year to buy extra seed and consider adding to the feeder options in your yard since several of these northern jewels have distinct seed and feeder style preferences.

Evening and Pine Grosbeaks love black oil sunflower seed on an open, platform-style feeder.

Crossbills enjoy the same set up. The smaller-billed Redpolls and Siskins love nyjer or thistle seed in tube feeders with smaller holes for the tiny seeds. All of the winter finches will readily eat sunflower chips. By offering these different seeds in as many different feeders as you can, special visitors like the winter finches can find places to feed in peace even while some of your more aggressive local birds are feeding at your other feeders.

If you'd like to try to discover some of the winter finches away from your feeders on dining on some of their natural food sources consider searching an arboretum or large public cemetery. These tend to have excellent varieties of the seed-bearing trees winter finches love.

Often these winter finches feed silently in flocks in their favorite seed crop trees so being able to recognize these trees to carefully scrutinize them is helpful. As Pine Siskins exploded into Ohio this fall, time and again they were found feeding in Arborvitae or White Cedar trees. Both Siskins and Redpolls love the catkins of most Birch and Alder trees as well as the large round seed pods of Sweet Gum and Sycamore. Crossbills love the seeds in the little cones of Hemlock trees. They also pick on the cones of Spruce trees, especially Norway Spruce. You can actually tell which Spruce cones crossbills have raided as those cones appear disheveled and uneven unlike the normal compressed appearance of a Spruce cone untouched by a crossbill.

Pine and Evening Grosbeaks clip off the seeds of deciduous trees like Box Elder, Maple, Ash, and Locust. Pine Grosbeaks also love lingering fruits like Mountain Ash and Crabapple.

So more than ever keep a close eye on your feeders at home. If you're lucky enough to have winter finches stop by your home, share the news with others who love birds. These super flights don't come often and the winter finches they bring are a joy for all.