

Winter Bird Feeders in Amherst

BY TOM SILEO

Many Amherst residents maintain bird feeders. These feeders provide easy access to food for birds and hours of entertainment for those who maintain them. But, what do we know about the birds that frequent our feeders? Where do they come from and how long have they been in our area?

Northern Cardinal



Let's begin with the Northern Cardinal. Most New England residents know the cardinal as well as they know the robin and the chickadee, but this was not always the case; during the early 1800s, the cardinal resided in the southern states, and only rarely appeared in the north.

"After listening with so much delight to the lively fife of the splendid cardinal," wrote Thomas Nuttall in *Manual of the Ornithology of the United States and of Canada* (1832), "as I traveled alone through the deep and wild solitudes which prevail over the Southern States, and bid, as I thought, perhaps an eternal adieu to the sweet voice of my charming companions, what was my surprise and pleasure, on the 7th of May, to hear, the first time in this State [Massachusetts], and in the Botanic Garden [Nuttall was curator of Harvard's Botanic Garden from 1825 to 1834], above an hour together, the lively and loud song of this exquisite vocalist, whose voice rose above every rival of the feathered race, and rung almost in echoes through the blooming grove in which he had chosen his retreat."

Nuttall also writes that these birds were so esteemed for their melody that, "according to Gemelli Careri (1699), the Spaniards of Havana, in a time of public distress and scarcity, bought so many of these birds, with which a vessel was partly freighted, from Florida, that the sum expended, at 10 dollars apiece, amounted to no less than 18,000 dollars!"

In *Birds of New England and Adjacent States* (1867), Edward A. Samuels did not include the cardinal, and it was not until 1955 that Ludlow Griscom and Dorothy E. Snyder in their *Birds of Massachusetts* were able to write that the cardinal "has crossed the Hudson River and has been pushing northward almost throughout its range since 1930; it now occurs annually in this state and is an uncommon, rather than rare or casual vagrant."

They also predicted that "a breeding record can be expected at any moment." And they were right; in 1961, two eggs were found at Wellesley on May 29th.

In 1963, the Allen Bird Club of Springfield surveyed the number of cardinals and titmice from Worcester westward. Then, in 1965 John Laestadius of Amherst, Massachusetts compiled the findings of a group of volunteers who surveyed the entire State of Massachusetts. Their numbers reflect the steady growth of the cardinal in the northeast: 1,168 (1965), 1,041 (1966), 1,422 (1967), 2,113 (1968).

Tufted Titmouse



"Comparatively little has been written about this bird," wrote Neltje Blanchan in his *Bird Neighbors* (1897), "because it is not often found in New England, where most of the bird litterateurs have lived."

"The Tufted Titmouse, or Crested Titmouse as it was called formerly, is a mere straggler in New England," wrote Edward H. Forbush in his *Birds of Massachusetts* (1929). He cited 4 reports.

By 1955, concerning the tufted titmouse, Ludlow Griscom and Dorothy E. Snyder were able to write in their *Birds of Massachusetts*, "Rare vagrant from the south, with an increasing number of records in the state in recent years, since the bird has moved northward into Connecticut."

According to Richard K. Walton in *Birds of the Sudbury River Valley*, "Prior to 1957, this species was rare in Massachusetts. During the fall

of 1957 there was a general invasion into our state as the tufted Titmouse expanded its range northward."

In 1963, the Allen Bird Club of Springfield surveyed titmice and cardinals from Worcester westward. They counted 156 titmice in 1963 and 210 in 1964. In 1965, John Laestadius of Amherst compiled the number of cardinals and titmice counted throughout Massachusetts by a volunteer group. Their numbers give an indication of the increase in titmouse population occurring at that time: 741 (1965), 619 (1966), 912 (1967), 1,192 (1968).

In 1993, Veit and Peterson in their *Birds of Massachusetts*, wrote the following: "Tufted Titmice are currently widespread as breeders in Massachusetts, although they are notably absent from the offshore islands and from forested areas at higher elevations in the interior."

In our area today, we can hardly step outside in mid-to-late March without hearing the clear, quick whistles - phew - phew - phew - phew - of this friendly little companion of the black-capped chickadee (also called the black-capped titmouse), the white-breasted nuthatch and the downy woodpecker.

Pine Siskin



Pine siskins are irregular visitors to our area; one year, they'll be totally absent, another, flocks will arrive at our feeders. These Canadian breeders will move south when the seed crop is poor up north. This year, moderate numbers of siskins are hanging around Amherst. Related to finches, they look like heavily streaked sparrows with a wash of yellow across their wings. They feed on sunflower seeds and remain close by when not feeding. It's always a pleasure to have siskins in our area.

White-Throated Sparrows

White-Throated Sparrows come to Amherst from farther north. Their ethereal "Oh sweet Canada-canada" song is common-

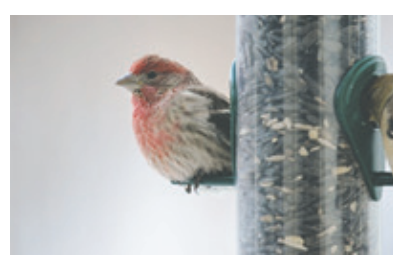
ly heard on any mountain hike in the Presidential Range, but can be heard in the southern portion of the White Mountain National Forest as well; I've heard them while hiking up Welch and Dickey Mountains in Waterville Valley (Thornton, MA), for instance. In winter these sparrows arrive in flocks and enjoy our sunflower seeds.

Northern Junco

Like the White-Throated Sparrow, the Northern Junco breeds in the mountains. Also common in the White Mountains, they're seen and heard in the Monadnock region as well. I've heard their subtle twitterings on Bald Mountain above Willard Pond in Hancock, for instance.

Juncos feed on the ground, but they also wait patiently in low shrubs, and will sometimes fly to a feeder. Unfortunately, their ground feeding habit makes them vulnerable to cats.

House Finch



The house finch came to the east as a released cage bird, which is no surprise to those who have enjoyed this bird's lively, musical and notes.

Oliver J. Austin, quoted in Arthur Cleveland Bent's *Life Histories* (1968), explains that in 1940, "cage-bird dealers in southern California shipped numbers of these birds, caught illegally in the wild, to New York dealers for sale as 'Hollywood finches.' Alert agents of the Fish and Wildlife Service spotted this violation of the International Migratory Bird Treaty Act and quickly put an end to the traffic. To avoid prosecution the New York dealers released their birds. The species was soon noted in the wild on nearby Long Island, and has slowly been increasing its range ever since." They reached Massachusetts about 1955.

The common finch of the last century was the purple finch, and today many people who grew up during the early part of this century mistake the house finch for the purple finch. There are two important distinguishing features: first, while the house finch is most often found in suburbs and cities, perched on phone wires or on the eaves of roofs, the purple finch prefers more

secluded woodland haunts; second, the purple finch has more red throughout its body, and it is hard to beat Roger Tory Peterson's description of it as "a sparrow dipped in raspberry juice."

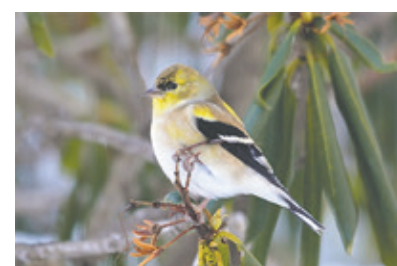
Carolina Wren

Carolina wrens are a sparrow-sized bird with a beautiful chestnut color with a white eye-line. They're active around a feeder, mostly focused on suet. They seem to show up earlier in the morning than other birds; and when they're not feeding, they don't hang around nearby shrubs like other birds; instead they fly to woodland edges, every so often releasing a beautiful warbling song.

Carolina wrens have always been common in America's southeastern states. In 1920, Charles Wendell Townsend in Supplement to the *Birds of Essex County, Massachusetts*, mentioned an invasion of wrens into New England in 1908 and 1909. But, this was a fluke.

During the 1950s, however, they began moving more steadily toward Massachusetts. By 1984, Walton wrote that the "Carolina Wren is a permanent resident in southeastern Massachusetts where its numbers fluctuate according to the severity of the winters." During the early 1990s, however, they entered New England: "This wren is gradually expanding its northerly range," wrote Bertrand B. Hopkins in *Birds of Groton & Ayer* (1995).

American Goldfinch



American goldfinches are permanent residents in New England, nesting, however, later than most other birds. After bull thistles go to seed in late summer, goldfinches use the plant's downy filaments to line their nest.

By winter goldfinches lose their bright yellow feathers, but not entirely. Closer observation reveals that some birds retain more of their yellow feathers than others. They're also not as vocal in winter. Throughout the summer months, their undulating flight is accompanied by a sweet characteristic song. In winter, however, they arrive in relatively quiet flocks that will often dominate our feeders. Surprisingly

pugnacious for a small bird, a goldfinch - unlike a chickadee - will sit perched at a feeder for a long time as if to guard the contents for itself.

Eastern Blue Jay

These rambunctious birds seem to behave themselves around feeders. They're cautious and will often feed on the ground. A blue jay perched next to a bright-red cardinal, against the white snow creates a beautiful winter scene.

Black-Capped Chickadee



Black-Capped Chickadees are active little birds, curious, but ever vigilant. They'll pull a sunflower seed from a feeder and then fly to the cover of a nearby shrub to eat it. Chickadees are hardy year-around residents in New England.

Downy Woodpecker

Like the black-capped chickadee, the downy and hairy woodpeckers are New England born and bred, and we identify these year-around residents with our forests. Downy woodpeckers are black and white with a powerful bill and a tongue that wraps around the inside of their skull. Their knocking on trees as they search for insects below the bark is a common woodland sound. These birds are also up with the times; my mother recently showed me an article showing how their heads are studied for clues to how human concussions can be avoided.

At our feeders, downies are drawn to suet, wrapping their tail below the feeder and pecking at the block of suet. Sometimes, they're unfortunately attracted to nearby wooden rails or the siding of a home where they habitually drill for insects, in a similar way that a dog might habitually dig a hole in the backyard.

Note: All photos taken this winter by the author at his backyard bird feeders.

A resident of Amherst, Tom Sileo is a Financial Advisor with a passion for the outdoors and local history. He has written hundreds of articles and columns on the outdoors and five books.

Time to Renovate Your Kitchen?

Discover how easy and affordable it is at our Kitchen 101 event
Tuesday, February 3rd, 6-8pm

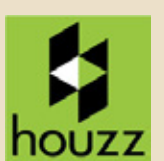
If that kitchen of yours needs renovation, this night is designed especially for you...

- Come and see before and after photos of kitchens just like yours
- Hear how easy and affordable a kitchen renovation is in a space your size
- Pick the brains of the experts about your kitchen - come with photos
- We assure you it will be time well spent - No fees or sign up required - Just show up... it really is that simple



SCHEDULE - KITCHEN 101 EVENT:
6 - 6:30pm: libations & hors d'oeuvres
6:30pm: kitchen seminar begins
7:30pm: Q&A session and bring in pic's of your kitchen

See their reviews on Houzz.com, they're leading the industry in happy customers! Here are just three of the forty reviews on Houzz from local customers just like you! See all their reviews on Houzz.com



★★★★★ *We love our kitchen so much. The staff were amazing and the job was finished exactly on time as promised. Sue and Jackie are phenomenal to work with. I recommend them with no reservations! Can't wait to do my bathrooms.*

★★★★★ *GSK worked with me to keep within my budget. Their designers were great! We didn't have many options for changing blue print of the kitchen, but they were able to come up with great storage solutions. We have a log home and one of my biggest goals was to lighten things up. I love my new bright efficient kitchen!! I would highly recommend them to anyone.*

★★★★★ *We had our kitchen completely remodeled with Plain & Fancy cabinets. The entire company, from sales staff to carpenters, contractors, and customer service were a joy to deal with. We felt they were the utmost in professional, did a great job, and we could not be happier with our kitchen! We would highly recommend this company to anyone in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, or Maine.*

GRANITE STATE 
Cabinetry
YOUR KITCHEN HEADQUARTERS
granitestatecabinetry.com

Granite State Cabinetry, 384 Route 101, Bedford, NH • 603-472-4080