

## **Bucks Birders Blog Vol. 1, Issue 3**

### **Winter Finches**

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In October of 2012, my mom and I rushed over to my Aunt's house after she spotted a single male Evening Grosbeak at her feeders. One December morning of the same year, I was greeted by two Common Redpolls on the feeders in my backyard. The combination of these birds' beautiful plumage and their elusive status in the Bucks County area totally captivated me. This was my first taste of a "good" winter for irruptive finches. Fast forward eight years and a few months later and my idea of a good winter for irruptive finches has completely changed.

Now that I'm in college, I spent the bulk of the 2020-2021 winter season in Burlington, Vermont, about 350 miles north of where I saw my first few northern finch species in Newtown, Pennsylvania. This geography change exposed me to some incredible displays of boreal finches. After reading a promising winter finch forecast and seeing eBird reports of Evening Grosbeaks and Common Redpolls pop-up throughout Burlington, I was hopeful for a productive winter. To say the least, I was not disappointed.

Things started out slow in the fall. In late October, I received a call from my mom in which she shared her enthusiasm about seeing six Evening Grosbeaks in our backyard (or perhaps she only called to brag). Although I was excited for her, I was almost embarrassed that someone over 300 miles south of me was having better luck with boreal finches. Fortunately, just a few days later, I saw one Evening Grosbeak on the University of Vermont campus. This was soon followed by seeing a small flock of Bohemian Waxwings at a nearby park. Still, I was afraid that I was in for another long, cold, and birdless winter. However, at the end of January, things started to ramp up. Common Redpolls were being reported everywhere and multiple groups of Pine Grosbeaks had taken up residency in local crabapple patches.

One of the first finch species that I sought out was the Common Redpoll. Fortunately, finding these birds was much easier than I expected. This semester, I am working as a teaching assistant for an Ornithology class. After having a meeting with the professor and mentioning that I was hoping to find some redpolls, he invited me over to his house where he claimed there had been a "redpoll development". Not only had a flock of around 70 Common Redpolls been

regularly visiting his feeders, but one or two Hoary Redpolls had also been joining in. The morning I arrived at his house, I was not disappointed. We were able to boost both of those numbers during the hour and a half that we watched from his back deck. A group of about 90 Common Redpolls were covering his feeders, scattered across the ground, and finding cover in an adjacent eastern white pine.



Mixed in were three Hoary Redpolls, distinguishable by their unmarked, white rumps, frosty white and gray backs, and minimally streaked flanks.



After watching a myriad of redpolls going to feeders, I wanted to find these birds foraging out in nature. After a quick survey of eBird, I found myself at a park just ten minutes away from my apartment. The main attraction of this spot was a large field that was left unmanaged, so a variety of grasses had developed, offering the redpolls with plenty of seed. The morning started off with a bang as I watched a Barred Owl successfully hunt alongside of the trail.



At this point, I was already thrilled with my outing, but it only continued to get better. A few minutes later, I arrived at the field. A large flock of Common Redpolls had been reported consistently from this spot, but there was a lot of area to search through. I began walking around the perimeter of the field, seeing no signs of redpolls. By the time I made it to the far corner from where I started, I was losing hope of finding these birds. Luckily, I finally found the flock foraging in the last remaining section of the field. I spent quite a while watching these birds as they slowly gained my trust and started moving closer.



After watching these birds for about 45 minutes, something flushed them. Even though I had already spent so much time with them, I was disappointed because they were finally beginning to

come close and give me good looks. However, this disappointment very quickly turned into elation as I found what had flushed the redpolls. A Northern Shrike was lurking low down in a stand of trees bordering the field. After the redpolls flew away, the shrike returned to the tops of the trees.



As I watched the bird sitting at the pinnacle of a large eastern cottonwood, I called my mom to share my excitement of finding a long-awaited nemesis bird. It was now my turn to “share my enthusiasm”!

In addition to watching the redpolls, I spent a lot of time visiting the same group of about 35 Pine Grosbeaks this winter. This group largely consisted of female birds with a few immature males mixed in. Occasionally, an adult male would make an appearance. These birds spent the vast majority of their time foraging in various crabapple trees strewn throughout an industrial park in South Burlington.



The incredibly tame demeanor of these birds allowed for some very close views. One day, I got closer views of a Pine Grosbeak than I ever imagined. As I was watching this flock feed, something flushed the birds. I didn’t see the culprit, but I assume that it was an accipiter looking

to make a meal out of one of these plump finches. Unfortunately, one female grosbeak struck a window of the building beside the group of crabapples they were in. I watched it for a few minutes hoping that it would fly away, but it showed no signs of moving. As I had become attached to these birds, I didn't want to see it get picked up by any potential predator. So, I slowly walked over to the bird, assuming that my presence would eventually urge it to fly. Again, it showed no signs of moving even by the time I was less than a foot away from it. So, I scooped it up, making sure that I was never restricting its ability to fly away. To my surprise, this bird sat in my hand for the next fifteen minutes. I was afraid this meant that I was watching the last few minutes of this bird's life. However, once the other Pine Grosbeaks began to return to the crabapples, this bird flew right up to join them.



Although I had incredible success with Common Redpolls and Pine Grosbeaks, there was still one species of winter finch that was eluding me: the Red Crossbill. These birds were being seen scattered across Chittenden County in various spruce and pine stands. Although they were in the area, their presence seemed to be much harder to predict than the other finches I saw. Finding them seemed to be a matter of being in the right place at the right time. One morning in late February, I found myself in the right place at just the right time. To my benefit, that place was right outside of my apartment. A small grove of Norway spruces had attracted these birds and I happened to walk through just as they shifted from one spruce to another. They were very vocal, and I recognized their “kip kip kip” calls immediately. Not only did I get to see multiple Red Crossbills at that time, but there were also a few White-winged Crossbills mixed in!



I couldn't believe that after striking out on them I would find them in my backyard! I was fortunate enough to get to see Red Crossbills in these Norway spruces many more times throughout the next month. And an uncharacteristically warm March even provided me with the opportunity to hear these birds sing!

As mid-March approached, many of these finches began to head back up north. However, another northern species came down to take their place. Around the second week of March, huge flocks of Bohemian Waxwings were being seen at the same group of crabapples that I had spent so much time watching the Pine Grosbeaks feed in. It was amazing to watch over 100 of these birds swarm around these trees, decimating any of the fruit that the grosbeaks had left behind.



Like the grosbeaks, these birds fed on any fruit they could find, whether that be in the tree or on the ground. However, while the Pine grosbeaks carefully picked the seed out of the fruit, the

waxwings were in search of the fleshy part. This brought some comical consequences. This late in the winter, much of the fruit had dropped to the ground. After sitting on the ground for so long, the crabapples actually started to ferment. When the feeding frenzy shifted to the ground, some individuals got drunk off of the fruit! While the waxwings can metabolize this alcohol better than humans, some were obviously affected. Their flight performance was reduced, and they were generally more approachable. After just a few days, the Bohemian Waxwings had cleared the crabapple trees and dispersed in search of a new abundant food source.

Now that it's nearing April, most of these birds have moved north, preparing for the breeding season that is quickly approaching. Although these species will be missed, the warmer weather and budding trees brings anticipation of warblers, vireos, and tanagers! With any luck, this spring migration will be half as productive as the winter irruption!