

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

Far Out!

In the late forenoon of 14 July, I observed a male Prothonotary Warbler at my suet feeder. Later in the afternoon the bird returned to the area, where he behaved aggressively territorial, repeatedly driving off Gray Catbirds, Northern Cardinals, and Carolina Chickadees. He also investigated around the eaves of the garage, acting very much like a nest-seeking Carolina Wren. Apparently he did not like the location, for he has not returned as I write this, 4 days later. I should add that I live in a residential neighborhood in Durham; my property is backed by a small wooded area containing a very small wet-weather stream.—OLIVER W. FERGUSON, 1212 Arnette Avenue, Durham, N.C. 27707

How Did They Know?

Our “regular” group of House Finches began gathering at the feeders on 31 October 1983. So I rushed right out and hung up two thistle feeders. There were about 12 finches that day. We think that these were some of our winter “regulars” from years before, because they seemed to know all about the location of the various feeders. By 1 March 1984, our dozen House Finches had grown to about 300, the best we could determine. They consumed thistleseed and oil sunflower seed by the gallon.

During the day-time hours of 28 March, approximately 90% of *all* our birds, both local and winter migrants, left us. We could not understand the sudden departure. But the next day, we knew: During the night of 28 March, several tornadoes hit Nash County, with three or four in our immediate neighborhood.

My sister and I were blessed with no damage to our home or barns. We took refuge under our old-timey heavy oak dining table, which we had pushed into a small hall in the middle of the house. We heard the roar and the whistling as the tornado passed over us.

The next day, we had only a few local birds at the feeders. The House Finches, Pine Siskins, and grosbeaks did not return. I feel that our birds could sense in some way that the tornadoes were coming. During April we had a few winter visitors that came through on their way north.

Then in May and June, we were delighted to see three adult pairs of House Finches feeding their fledglings at the sunflower feeders. They did not go to the thistle feeders, so these adults could not have been any of our “regular” ones. I must say that the young ones

are noisier and more demanding for food than even the young of the Northern Cardinal or Blue Jay. We think that each of the three adult pairs have had two nestings—anyway, we have 18 or 20 House Finches flitting here and there over the yard.

Now, we wonder, will this little flock stay here through the fall and winter and then breed here in the spring? We have enjoyed hearing them this summer, murmuring and twittering in the trees, and watching a whole family at the bird bath. House Finches seem to be everywhere—all over the place—and eating like it is winter time.—BEVERLIE JOYNER, 1101 Old Mill Road, Rocky Mount, N.C. 27801

More on House Finches

For good or ill, there is no question about it. Our part of the United States has been invaded by a bunch of Westerners—House Finches, that is. From scattered groups of winter visitors some years ago, which excited local birders, the House Finch now has become established as a breeding bird in many locations in the Carolinas. Some folks say that these birds will become as common and pesky as House Sparrows before long. One thing that they have, from a birdwatcher's point of view, is color and song. Whatever your point of view, the species appears to be here to stay.

We have House Finches at winter feeders and see them in the spring and summer, often with young in tow. We have never been so fortunate as to find a nest in the area. However, this summer we were told of a nest site that was quite interesting. A young graduate student at N. C. State University lives in a sub-division in northwest Raleigh. He discovered the nest of a House Finch, in a hanging basket of ferns, right outside his front door. He and his wife watched the progress as much as possible. On 12 June three eggs hatched and the following day, the last two. The young birds fledged some 2 weeks later, although the couple were not present at the time. Examining the empty nest, they found it to be lined with white hairs. They have a white cat, which always stays indoors. They surmised that cat hairs, picked up on their own shoes and deposited on the porch, were the ones used by the birds.

We have noted that House Finches may be seen and heard in almost any part of Raleigh these days, even downtown on Fayetteville Street Mall. As the cigarette commercial used to say, "You've come a long way, baby" from a small flock seen in Zebulon and the wintering ones, which we used to make special trips to see, in the Raleigh Rose Garden.—GAIL T. WHITEHURST, 1505 Brooks Avenue, Raleigh, N.C. 27607

Department Editor's Change of Address

As this issue of *The Chat* goes to press, Gail Whitehurst and her husband, Carl, are in the process of moving from Raleigh to Asheville. Their new address is 52 Lakeshore Drive, Asheville, N.C. 28801. Although their many friends in Raleigh will miss Gail and Carl, we are looking forward to reading her reports in *The Chat* about the birds in their new back yard.—EFP