

General Field Notes

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Pine Siskins build nest in Transylvania County, N.C.

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The occurrence of Pine Siskins (*Carduelis pinus*) in the mountains of North Carolina during their presumed breeding season was first recorded by Brewster (1886), who found them singing in the Black Mountains on 2 June 1885. Numerous May, June and July sightings were reported from many sites over a period of more than a century without any documentation of breeding within the state. Following the massive invasion of Pine Siskins in the winter of 1981-82, Watson and Watson (1987) reported possible extra-limital breeding at Southern Pines, N.C., and Williams (1987) described a preflight Pine Siskin found at her home in Asheville, N.C. Siebenheller and Siebenheller (1987) expressed the opinion that the practically unlimited food supply at well-maintained feeding stations encourages Pine Siskins to nest at relatively low elevations in the mountains. They described behavior suggesting courtship and local breeding in Transylvania County, N.C. in April, May and June of 1986.

On 2 June 1986, McNair (1988) "discovered a female Pine Siskin building a nest on a horizontal limb of a 15 m high Fraser fir (*Abies fraseri*) on the northeast slope of Mt. Mitchell 75 m below the summit." A male perched nearby and sang occasionally, but he did not defend the territory around the nest. The breeding pair associated with 8 to 14 other Pine Siskins that were active in the vicinity of the summit. The nest appeared to be abandoned when

McNair returned to the site on 8 June. During his June visits McNair also observed singing and chasing by males, display flights, and courtship feeding.

On 12 April 1991 the authors and Susan Mitchell, of Pisgah Forest, watched Pine Siskins constructing a nest at Gwynn Valley Camp (elevation 2,650 ft.) on Island Ford Road in the southeast portion of Transylvania County. At 1100 hours, we saw two birds high in the top of a hemlock (*Tsuga* sp.). When one of them had gathered a beakful of nesting material, they both flew off swiftly to an adjacent hemlock. Mitchell was able to follow their flight and saw one of them alight next to a nest and begin to weave in the new material. The nearly-completed nest, woven of rootlets and grasses (as best we could determine) was well out on a down-sloping limb, about 25-30 ft. high.

The two birds flew to a leafless deciduous tree and landed near a fairly large, somewhat battered nest made by another species the previous year. They then removed several bits of straw from this old nest and flew back to the nest they were building in the hemlock. One of them worked this new material into the center of the new nest. After a few more minutes the birds flew across an open field and out of sight. We obtained permission from the owners of the camp to revisit the area freely over the next few weeks as nesting progressed.

On the afternoon of 14 April we saw the female siskin land at the nest with a beakful of fine material. Our Bushnell 20-power telescope was trained on the nest and afforded details not seen on the first visit. The female siskin leaned down into the nest with this tuft of grass until only her tail was visible over the rim. She seemed to be working the material into the inner portion of the nest. She then flew off and, because of rain, our observations ceased for that day.

On 16 April we arrived at 1000 hours to find the female siskin gathering dandelion fluff in the lawn adjacent to the nest tree. She flew up towards the nest at our arrival, but because of our angle at the time we could not tell if she actually went to the nest or not. Within a minute she was back on the lawn and was then joined by the male. They remained only a minute more on the lawn, then flew off into some deciduous trees 100 yards away, where they disappeared.

On 19 April we set up the telescope on the nest at 1330 hours and were elated to find that one siskin appeared to be incubating eggs. We saw a tail visible above the nest rim. There was a slight movement, then the bird was still again, and remained so for 20 minutes. At 1350 hours this bird suddenly and quietly left the nest and flew to an adjacent hemlock, then disappeared into the foliage. At 1400 hours the bird returned, again very directly and silently. We assume that his bird was the female, as the female does all the incubating in siskin pairs (Palmer, 1968). However, we were not able to verify this visually. We observed no nest-building this day. The returning bird settled right down into the nest upon arrival, and we could see it moving slightly to adjust its position. Then it was completely still again, and remained so for at least the next 15 minutes. It then began to rain and we left.

On 21 April we were not able to tell whether the nest was occupied. We watched it closely for 2 hours and did not see any activity. There was no evidence of a head or a tail sticking up above the rim, as there had been two days previously.

On 23 April, Mitchell visited the nest in the morning and saw the male at the edge of the nest, with material in his beak. He appeared to be removing

material from the nest rather than adding it. He then flew off. Mitchell saw no sign of the female. In the afternoon of the same day we set our telescope on the nest and promptly saw the male appear silently at the nest and begin to pick small bits of lichen from the outside. He did this methodically for a minute or two until he had a beakful. He then moved about three feet to the right and disappeared into the interior of the tree. We did not see him leave the tree. He never looked into the nest itself while he was there. We saw no sign of the female although we continued to watch for an hour. In subsequent days we visited the nest site repeatedly, as did Mitchell, but we never again saw either Pine Siskin, and we were forced to conclude that they had abandoned the nesting attempt.

We believe this observation is significant because the pair did complete the nest and apparently began to incubate a clutch of eggs, as indicated by the behavior of the female on 19 April. Thus, this seems to be the first documented nest-with-eggs for the Pine Siskin in North Carolina. In addition, the fact that the pair built a nest at the relatively low elevation of 2,650 ft. confirms our suspicions, stated in an earlier *Chat* article (Siebenheller and Siebenheller, 1987) that this species should be looked for at all elevations during the spring breeding season, not just at the higher "northern" altitudes, as is usually indicated.

One thing about the 1991 attempted nesting surprised us greatly. During the winter of 1990-91, Pine Siskins were scarce to absent in this area. In all our previous experience, (Siebenheller and Siebenheller, 1982, 1987) every instance of possible, probable or confirmed nesting occurred after a winter in which the species was very plentiful in the area.

In 1978 the "invasion" into southern New York did not occur until March, but the birds were abundant after that into the spring. In 1991, however, we personally saw no Pine Siskins at all during the winter, and heard only scattered reports of a few at feeders in the county. So this pair, nest building in April, took us completely by surprise.

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Northern Raven (*Corvus corax*) Nesting in Forsyth County, N.C.

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The Northern Raven (*Corvus corax*) is an uncommon permanent resident in the higher elevations of the Appalachian Mountains, usually above 3000 feet (Potter et al. 1980). In March 1974, a nesting pair was discovered on the east wall of Big Pinnacle at Pilot Mountain State Park in Surry County at an elevation of 2400 feet (Teulings 1974). The Pilot Mountain nesting constituted the easternmost breeding record of the Northern Raven in North Carolina.