

General Field Notes

General Field Notes briefly report such items as rare sightings, unusual behaviors, significant nesting records, or summaries of such items.

First, second, or third sightings of species in either state must be submitted to the appropriate Bird Records Committee prior to publication in The Chat.

First Confirmed Nesting of Pine Siskin (*Spinus pinus*) in Great Smoky Mountains National Park

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My wife, Dollyann Myers and I were looking at an email from our friend, bird guide Mike Nelson, in late May 2013. He mentioned that among other birds that he had shown some clients on 25 May, he had also seen a Pine Siskin (*Spinus pinus*) building a nest on the trail going to the Clingman's Dome observation tower, Swain County, North Carolina. We immediately thought this species and nest location might be of some ornithological interest. We asked Nelson if he would show us the exact location of the nest. He said he would be happy to, and we made arrangements to meet early on the morning of 1 June 2013.

Observations

We met Nelson and arrived at the Clingman's Dome parking lot around 8:30 a.m., only to find a lot of fog and windy conditions. We immediately heard Pine Siskins calling and saw several birds flying around the main parking lot. We got our gear and started walking up the paved trail that goes to the Clingman's Dome observation tower.

After about 200 m, there was a 15-m high Red Spruce tree (*Picea rubens*) on the left side of the trail. The nest was in the lower part of the tree, 9 m off the path and about 4 m off the ground, near the end of a downward-sloping branch, among a clump of needles. The location (by Google Maps) was N 35° 33' 32.95", W 83° 29' 46.53", 1940 m elevation, in Swain County, North Carolina. This location was approximately 300 m from the Tennessee state line. (Figure 1)

We spent about one hour in the area watching the nest and trying to get good views of it, taking photographs when the fog would occasionally lift. When



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

the fog cleared, we would get good views of the female sitting on the nest, apparently incubating. (Figure 2) We did not see her leave the nest or be fed by a male during the time we were there. While we watched the female sitting on the nest, we would occasionally see her shift around a bit, as if trying to get more comfortable while sitting on eggs. The nest itself appeared to us to be complete, or at least mostly so, and constructed of grasses. It did not appear to be under construction.

While we were happy to record the nesting attempt, we really wanted to confirm the nesting record with young in the nest. So we looked up breeding information (Ehrlich et al. 1988), and the reference stated that Pine Siskins incubate for about 13 days and the young fledge about 14-15 days later.

Nelson visited the site again on the 12 June and found the female on the nest, but this time the male was bringing food to her. (Figure 3) No chicks were seen at this time so we assumed that brooding was continuing.

Allowing for unknown starting dates for incubation, we guessed that about 19 June, the nest would contain young.

We returned on 19 June 2013 and made the following observations over the course of 45 minutes. The nest contained at least five young. (Figure 4)

The chicks were occasionally being fed by an adult female. We did not see the adult male feeding the chicks. The feeding appeared to be by regurgitation. No insects were noticed being brought to the chicks while we were there. The female fed the chicks twice while we were there and then began brooding the chicks.

On 30 July, Nelson reported that the bough holding the nest was gone, probably due to high wind damage as it looked broken, not sawn off.

Discussion

Pine Siskins are thought to be more likely to nest in this region after a winter invasion (McNair 1988b), and this area had a moderate invasion in the winter of 2012.

To our knowledge, this was the first ever confirmed Pine Siskin nest (with eggs or young) found within the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Wetmore (1939) found a “young female barely grown” at 832 m on 2 July 1937, near Cosby, Tennessee, in the park. He also noted that Ganier and Clebsch reported Pine Siskin from Clingman’s Dome in June 1938. Stupka (1963) found “3 recently fledged young” at Indian Gap at 1605 m in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park on 13 June 1938. No nest with eggs or young was found for either of these reports.

This nest may have been the second most southerly confirmed nest (by latitude) in the Blue Ridge Mountain Province of the Southern Appalachians. The most southerly confirmed nest of Pine Siskin (with eggs or young in the nest) was found at Plott Balsam Mountains, Jackson County, NC, at

approximately 35° 27' 49.48" latitude (Simpson 1993).

A fledgling was found on Lookout Mtn. in Tennessee (Caldwell 1991) at approximately 34° 59' 05.02" latitude, and nest building was observed in SE Transylvania Co., NC, (Siebenheller and Siebenheller 1992) at 35° 10' 18.06" latitude. Neither record produced a confirmed nest with eggs.

Literature Cited

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