

ABOUT THE COVER: Common Redpoll

"They come with the snowflakes out of the dun sky of November and leave as spring approaches." So wrote Forbush of this hardy, boreal species. The Common Redpoll has one of the most northerly breeding ranges of the North American passerines. It winters in the southern portion of its breeding range and only irregularly farther south, being common to abundant in Massachusetts in some winters and scarce or lacking in other years. Although there does not appear to be a regular pattern of occurrence, varying numbers of redpolls usually put in a brief appearance every two or three winters. Of the small cardueline finches—goldfinch, siskin, and redpoll—the redpoll is the species least commonly encountered in our clime.

The normal time of arrival is late November. Rarely, occasional individuals are encountered in late October, but even when birds appear early in the season, it is no indication that a flight will occur. Often it is not until the latter part of January or even early February that redpolls become widespread in flight years. Numbers are greatest in the interior river valleys and along coastal dunes. They are commonly encountered feeding on the catkins of streamside alders and birches and in weed fields and roadsides in agricultural areas. Redpolls are common at times at feeding stations where hulled sunflower and thistle seed are offered. They may occur in homogeneous flocks or in mixed flocks with goldfinches or siskins. In unfavorable light, identification of individuals can be chancy, but once well seen, the red cap, black chin, and, in males, a rosy blush on the chest serve to identify them readily. Flocks may be exceedingly tame, allowing close approach and leisurely observation. On the other hand, they are sometimes very skittish, and a loud noise or slight movement sends them instantly into panicked flight.

After a brief stay in winter, most redpolls return north in March, leaving a scattering of individuals still present in early April. However, in 1978 sizable flocks remained at thistle feeders well into the latter half of April.

The flight call is a rapid, rattled "chit-chit-chit" that is like the call note of the White-winged Crossbill. Pine Siskins also have a similar call, but it is usually interspersed with a distinctive "zwee" on a rising inflection. Flocks tend to fly in tightly packed groups with the distinctive undulating flight that is typical of finches.

In years when redpolls are common, a few individuals of the paler, frostier Hoary Redpoll species are reported. Care should be taken to critically examine such individuals since variation within the Common Redpoll species can be extensive, especially in late winter when feather wear can produce pale birds. Indeed, the validity of Hoary Redpoll as a distinct species is now in doubt.

Richard A. Forster