

A WEEK IN THE WHITES WITH WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILLS

by Andrew H. Williams

We vacationed in 1989 in New Hampshire's White Mountains. We spent all day every day hiking up to treeless summits and down again—my wife's idea of a good time. This vacation was hers to plan, and, incredible as it may seem to *Bird Observer* readers, my wife is not interested in birds.

Boreal birding can be very slow, but in 1989 the White Mountains were host to White-winged Crossbills who entertained me daily, and my total immersion in the outdoors afforded me a wonderful opportunity to get to know them better. The crossbills really made my vacation.

Our first day out was Saturday, August 19. We hiked up to Franconia Ridge, walked north above tree line to Mt. Lafayette, and down. As we hiked up, several flocks of noisy finches passed by overhead, sometimes visible and sometimes not. Finally I got a close look at them and saw prominent wing bars and one electric pink male in the flock. White-winged Crossbills! I was ecstatic. Rarely had I seen them before, and here they were on our first hike. Little did I know that we would be repeatedly seeing them over the next week. On this Franconia day I noticed that they were most common just below tree line, that the flocks traveled quite far, and that the birds were noisy. Three times a flock of about fifteen passed by, and I assumed this was one flock passing three times. Perhaps there were thirty to fifty birds for that day.

Sunday was quite wet, and our hiking was two short walks at low elevations. I found no birds of interest. But Monday was different. I found several worthwhile birds, and all of them were high up on Zealand Ridge. Two Gray Jays were above Zeacliff Pond, and they were happy to perch on my hand to take raisins and peanuts from me. I pished in a group of three Boreal Chickadees nearby. And again, there were White-winged Crossbills: a single bird perched on a low spruce top beside the trail allowed such a close approach that I could see its crossed bill before it flew off. A group of four and another of ten to fifteen White-wings on this day.

On Tuesday, with a forecast of clearing in the afternoon, we hiked up the Ridge of the Caps to tree line and cut across to Mt. Washington's summit. We came back the same way, still waiting for clear skies. Just before we descended into the trees, the sky opened up, and we had some breathtaking views. Again, it was just below tree line that I found the interesting birds of the day: one Common Raven, one Boreal Chickadee, and the White-winged Crossbills. Singles or small flocks were heard going overhead in the fog on five occasions. I saw a flock of eleven twice and then a flock of five—perhaps twenty to thirty birds in all.



Northern Peaks, White Mountains, NH

Photo by Martha McClellan

Wednesday proved to be my most exciting day. We drove east to Pinkham Notch and climbed up to North Carter Mountain. The hike up was pretty uneventful. It was drizzling a bit, but I did pish in a group of three Boreal Chickadees. The action started when we reached the ridgeline. Five White-winged Crossbills perched on spruce tops above the trail allowed me to come close enough to see their wing bars and crossed bills before they flew. Two others flew by. We decided to walk a short way along the ridgeline despite the fog that eliminated what might have been a view as far as the Atlantic. In a half hour on the ridge we were almost continuously in the presence of crossbills. A flock of about twenty-five. Two heard but unseen flocks passed by. A group of three and another unseen flock. And then about thirty wheeled overhead giving me time to count them. One perched immature allowed my close examination, and I saw its crossed bill and the heavy streaking on its underside. Two others flew by, and the immature joined them. Then a single. Two more unseen flocks. As we descended by the same trail we had come up earlier, five more unseen flocks were heard overhead.

My earlier observation that these birds were common just below tree line was reinforced by this ridgeline experience. Though the ridge is forested, the trees are small. If the ridge were higher, tree line would soon be reached. It

seems these birds fly in highly fissionable flocks—continually breaking apart and reforming. When a flock perches, the birds are quite spread out over the tops of spruces. We noticed two species of spruce with green cones. A long-needed spruce had upright cones on its top, and a short-needed spruce had smaller, pendant cones hanging from its highest branches.

As we descended, we noticed moose tracks preceding us down the mountainside. We approached turn after turn on the trail with the hope of rounding the bend and seeing the animal. But, alas, the tracks stopped, and there was no moose. It had left the trail and entered the surrounding woods, which now were peaceful and seemingly empty of animal life.

Farther down, I did find another Boreal Chickadee, but the big find was a Black-backed Woodpecker! My first experience with this species was here in the White Mountains as a child at camp, when I found several of them working a snag beside the trail on Mt. Washington, an event that highlighted that summer. Now, here again, a Black-backed Woodpecker quietly worked on several snags near the trail. This was at 3400 feet in an area dominated by spruces but with some white birches present. What a reunion!

On Thursday we again climbed up the Ridge of the Caps to Mt. Jefferson's summit. We had hoped for views, but it remained cloudy, wet, and cold; so we came back down almost right away. Again, many crossbills appeared just below tree line. Ascending, we saw a group of about twenty and another of about forty. Descending, we saw several flocks of two and three birds and what I assume was the same flock of about twenty seen when we went up the trail. This large flock was perched when we came upon it the second time, with birds sitting in the spruce tops over a wide area. They flew up and away as we walked among them.

We ate lunch at the parking lot at Jefferson Notch, which at 3009 feet is the highest place on a public road in New Hampshire. Twenty-five feet from our car was a second Black-backed Woodpecker! I walked to within ten feet of it as it worked up and down a living balsam fir.

That afternoon we climbed the sunny south-facing slope of the Webster Cliff Trail in Crawford Notch. Two Common Ravens flew by, but no crossbills. I do not know whether we were not high enough or whether this slightly warmer environment did not suit them.

On Friday we again drove east to Pinkham Notch. We climbed Tuckerman Ravine over to and up Mt. Monroe, back across Bigelow Lawn, and down the Boot Spur Trail, a loop of about eleven miles. Ascending, we found a few crossbills: two unseen flocks, a flock of two, a flock of three. Three crossbills flew over us as we crossed Bigelow Lawn, and these were the only crossbills I saw above tree line. Descending, seven groups passed unseen plus a flock of six. A flock of three was perched on a spruce top beside the trail and included a

bright pink male. At the car, I found several Pine Siskins.

On Saturday we climbed Mt. Adams. The weather was clear but cold and very windy. I could stand on the summit, but I could not walk without being blown over. Because of the cold and the wind, we kept moving. No sensible crossbill would be out in such weather, and I saw none. A Common Raven and two solitary Boreal Chickadees down in the woods were all I found.

On Sunday we hiked up Mt. Willard. This was a short morning stroll up a former carriage road, our last walk before heading home. As we sat on the ledge looking out over Crawford Notch, despite our low elevation, two White-winged Crossbills flew by.

There must have been hundreds of White-winged Crossbills high in the White Mountains that summer. Their presence added immeasurably to my fun hiking there. Had I known they would be there, I might have expected to see them. But one can never expect to find crossbills. Like some other boreal birds, they are unpredictable. A large part of my pleasure at finding them was the surprise.

Very probably they will not be there in the summer of 1990. But some other boreal erratic may be. If you cannot find the time or the cash to go as far as the Maritimes for alcids, to the Dry Tortugas or to Falcon Dam, to the Chiricahuas for parrots, to Salton Sea or the Pribilofs, or if your spouse flatly refuses to vacation at the Brownsville dump, perhaps a short trip north to the Whites will please you. As for me, next year I may skip the hiking and just loiter around Jefferson Notch!

ANDREW H. WILLIAMS describes himself as a "Route 128-fast-track-corporate-computer dropout" who became a science librarian at Smith College. A Massachusetts naturalist long concerned about endangered species, Andy left in May 1990 to do graduate work in the field of conservation at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. *Bird Observer* wishes him well.

Editor's Note. For birders who find New Hampshire a convenient summer vacation spot and, like the author, are accompanied by nonbirding companions, it may be worthwhile to review the following *Bird Observer* articles about the Granite State.

"Birding on Mts. Clinton and Jackson in the White Mountains of New Hampshire" by Michael S. Greenwald, 1981, 9(2): 53-65.

"A Guide to the Birds of the Squam Lakes Region, New Hampshire" by Beverly S. Ridgely. 1983, 11(3): 125-136.

"Summer Birding in the White Mountains" by Peter H. Yaukey, 1987, 15(2): 56-60.

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