

## RED CROSSBILLS CHANGE FEEDING HABITS

By Dorothy W. Briggs



Red Crossbills are not new to Plymouth County, Massachusetts. They have been observed in this area many times, especially in the Myles Standish State Forest in coniferous trees. What makes them news this year, is the fact that they are coming in to feeding stations and are eating both sunflower seeds and thistleseeds. They can be seen in flocks of twenty to thirty-five in the air as well as in the trees but thusfar they seem to feed in pairs, or from five to eight birds. To date they have been reported in Middleboro, Carver, Plymouth, Manomet and Marion, Massachusetts.

On January 24, 1970, I caught a male in one of Mr. Bigger's Potter traps. I caught two more males on the 28th., and on the 29th., two females. These birds were photographed by various people. On February 4th., Cindy Youngstrom called me from Manomet Bird Observatory to report that she had banded two White-winged and three Red Crossbills that day.

One of the Red Crossbills was a male that had flown into a window at the Manomet School. She brought it back to the Observatory where it was released. The list of Red Crossbill banding data follows:

105-118563 SY-M banded 01-24-70 at Middleboro, Mass. Wing 92mm. This bird was mostly brick red, with some bright green across the back, and with a few yellow and green feathers around the neck. The rump was bright yellow.

105-118564 AHY-M banded 01-28-70 at Middleboro, Mass. Wing 90mm. The plumage was mostly brick red, but with some yellow and green mixed in around the neck. The rump was bright red with a few yellow and green feathers. The feet were very large.

105-118565 AHY-M banded 01-28-70 at Middleboro, Mass. Wing 97mm. The plumage was almost identical with the foregoing. This male also had very large feet.

105-118566 AHY-F banded 01-29-70 at Middleboro, Mass. Wing 85mm. Body plumage olive-green with gray edgings. Rump was bright yellow-green. Outertail feathers were dull brownish, with a gray thin line on the edge of the inner webs. The remaining tail feathers were the same on the inner web, but with a narrow green line on the edge of the outer web. The bill

was a dark gray. The primaries and secondaries edged as the tail feathers, outer primaries not edged with green. Primary and Secondary coverts were edged in gray and olive green. Upper coverts were edged in gray and olive green. The entire wing had a greenish cast over the gray brown color. The breast and sides were almost as bright as the rump. The throat was light gray with dark gray stripes. The crown feathers were dark gray with wide edgings of olive-green. The undertail coverts were medium gray with light gray edges and black shafts. The uppertail coverts were the same as the tail. The eye color was gray-brown. The long narrow tongue was pink with a light gray tip. The feet were noticeably smaller than the males'.

105-118567 AHY-F banded on 01-29-70 at Middleboro, Mass. Wing 88mm. Plumage much as above bird but duller green. The throat was also dull green. This bird also had the smaller feet.

109-150103 ASY-F banded on 02-04-70 at Manomet Bird Observatory. Wing 85mm. Green plumage with no buffy edges on wing coverts.

109-150104 AHY-U banded on 02-04-70 at Manomet Bird Observatory. Wing 88mm. Green plumage with a bright yellow rump.

109-150105 ASY-M banded on 02-04-70 at Manomet Bird Observatory. Wing 94mm. This bird was in red plumage with no green or yellow feathers, and had no buffy edges to the wing coverts.

Our traps were baited with both sunflower and thistle seeds. My traps were on a picnic table and those at Manomet Bird Observatory were on the ground. Forbush and Pearson mention the fact that the Crossbills have a sticky substance on their tongues which allows them to pick up almost any kind of seed. I noticed that these birds had a deep cleft in the roof of the mouth, and a deep well-like area under the tongue. The tongue itself is very thick, but narrow, and it comes to a rounded point at the tip.

The birds used their bills as a third "claw" to maneuver inside the trap often hanging upside down when not feeding. They were not timid and did not seem to mind eating while being watched. After posing a long time for pictures, they would get perturbed and bite, and CAN THEY BITE! We tried to age and sex them, using Merrill Wood's new book, but we feel that much more information is needed on their plumage sequence. Can anyone offer assistance in this area?

The photograph on page 202 courtesy of Mr. Clinton Clark of Middleboro, Massachusetts.

Bibliography: Forbush, E. H., "Birds of Massachusetts"

Bibliography(Cont'd)

Pearson, G. T., "Birds of North America"

Wood, Merrill, "A Bird-bander's Guide To Determination of Age and Sex of Selected Species"

Data from Manomet Bird Observatory was contributed by Kathleen S. Anderson, director, and Cindy Youngstrom, bander.

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REPLACEMENT OF RECTRICES BY SONG SPARROW

By Dr. Kenneth W. Prescott

While banding an HY Song Sparrow(Melospiza melodia) 21 December, 1969, its tail was accidentally removed. Subsequently, the Sparrow (75-42062) returned five times which offered an opportunity to observe the replacement of rectrices which appeared complete on 8 February 1970. In order not to injure erupting feathers, measurements were made from the base of the preen gland to the longest rectrix.

| <u>Date</u> | <u>Weight</u><br>(gms) | <u>Wing length</u><br>(mm) | <u>Fat Class</u><br>(0-3) | <u>Tail length</u><br>(mm) |
|-------------|------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| 12-21-69    | 24.8                   | 68.0                       | 0                         | tail removed               |
| 01-03-70    | 26.3                   |                            | 3                         | 10.0*                      |
| 01-10-70    | 26.9                   |                            | 3                         | 35.8                       |
| 01-12-70    | -                      |                            | -                         | 40.0                       |
| 02-08-70    | 25.8                   |                            | 3                         | 70.0                       |

\*feathers erupting from quills.

In January and February 1970, I measured the tails of four other Song Sparrows in a similar manner for comparison. All had rectrices badly worn.

| <u>Band Number</u> | <u>Date Banded</u> | <u>Age at Banding</u> | <u>Wing Length</u><br>(mm) | <u>Weight</u><br>(gms) | <u>Fat Cl.</u><br>(0-3) | <u>Tail length</u><br>(mm) |
|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| 75-41770           | 01-18-70           | AHY                   | 67.0                       | 26.0                   | 3                       | 68.0                       |
| 75-42052           | 11-27-69           | HY                    | 62.0                       | 22.6                   | 0                       | 65.0                       |
| 75-43136           | 02-08-70           | AHY                   | 67.0                       | 24.6                   | 3                       | 68.0                       |
| 75-41776           | 01-25-70           | AHY                   | 64.5                       | 24.2                   | 0                       | 63.0                       |

The replaced tail of 75-42062 appeared complete on 8 February or 48 days after the original loss; however, it could have reached its full length in less than 48 days, sometime between 12 January and 8 February. While the rectrices appeared worn on 8 February, they were not nearly as worn as those of the four other Song Sparrows.

--N.J. State Museum, Cultural Center Complex, West State St, Trenton, N.J.