Wild Birds Unlimited® Nature Shop

Winter 2012

BIRDTracks®

Species Profile: Purple Versus House Finch

by JULIE ZICKEFOOSE


Purple Finch, male.

BILL THOMPSON, III


House Finch, male.

DAVE MENKE/USFWS

The two common "red" finches that visit bird feeders all over North America are the Purple Finch and the House Finch. The House Finch is the more common of these two species and also the more commonly misidentified, because its plumage can vary from dull red to bright orange. I'll start by describing the male Purple Finch.

Male Purple Finch

The male Purple Finch is a lovely bird, thanks to the pinkish-purple wash of color throughout his plumage. It looks as if the male Purple Finch has been dipped in raspberry wine. This raspberry color bleeds onto the bird's back and wings—the lower sides and belly only are clean white. On the male House Finch these areas are streaked with brown.

Male House Finch

A male House Finch has much more localized color. He is reddish only on his head, breast, and lower back. The upper back and wings are streaky brown, without a wash of color. Perhaps the quickest way to distinguish the two adult male finches is to look at the birds' lower flanks (the area on the bird's side from below the wings to the tail): if the flanks are streaked with brown, it's a male House Finch. If the flanks are white with a hint of pink, it's a male Purple Finch.

Female Purple Finch versus female House Finch

Female Purple Finches look entirely different from males and are much more boldly streaked than female House Finches. Look for the sharp contrast in the female Purple Finch's dark brown and white areas. Female House Finches are more muted in color, with fine streaks of brown and tan blend-

Continued on page 6

CONTENTS

Birds in Depth

Cozy Winter Housing for Birds

by BILL THOMPSON, III

Weatherizing and cleaning takes place before new nesting material can be placed in the box.

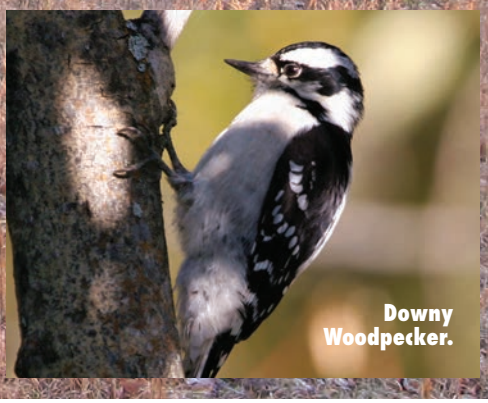
BILL THOMPSON, III

Eastern Bluebird.

BILL THOMPSON, III

Northern Pygmy-Owl.

BOB MILES/USFWS



Downy Woodpecker.

DONNA DEWHURST/USFWS

You might be surprised at how many of your bird houses are used as nighttime roosts in winter. Telltale clues are there in the form of droppings, feathers, and bits of food.

If you live in a region with cold winter weather, you can make your nest boxes cozier with a few winterizing tricks. Start by cleaning out the box if it has messy old nesting material in it. Fashion a new nest cup of clean, dried grasses and place it in the box.

This is a good time to check the water resistance of your nest boxes. If the sides or top are weathered or cracked they may absorb rather than shed water. If the wood is too far gone, it's time to replace the house.

Otherwise a coating of all-weather wood stain or light-colored latex paint will help keep the winter dampness out. Stain or paint on the outside only and try to do it when birds are not likely to use the house.

This is also a good time to check the hardware on your boxes and poles. Wood can shrink as it weathers, and screws and nails can work loose. Are the access doors closing tightly? Is the box securely attached to the pole? Is the baffle still hanging properly?

The final bit of winterizing involves plugging the boxes' vent holes. These holes are vital in summer to keep the nestlings from getting too hot. In winter the holes are just drafty. We plug the vent holes using moldable clay weather stripping. Stuff the weather stripping snugly into the vent holes from the outside. This will help keep the body heat of roosting birds from escaping, and it will keep rain and snow from getting into the box. Cozy winter housing is a small gift you can give to your birds as the cold weather sets in.

Likely Suspects for Winter Bird House Lodging

A surprising array of birds can use your summertime lodgings on a cold winter evening:

- Carolina Wren
- Small woodpeckers such as Hairy or Downy
- Black-capped or Carolina Chickadee
- Red-breasted or White-breasted Nuthatches
- Tufted Titmouse
- Bluebirds
- Small owls—Pygmy-Owls, Screech or Elf Owls
- Bats

Bird Bits

Understanding Birds' Life Stages

by KEVIN J. COOK

Most people use the terms "chick," "juvenile," "fledgling," "immature," and "subadult" as synonyms for any young bird. A bird might be a juvenile in one breath and an immature in the next.

Historical bird literature reveals that ornithologists have not always used the terms consistently, either. Nevertheless, these are the traditional ornithological descriptions:

1 Hatchling: A bird freshly out of the egg. A bird remains a hatchling while it relies on its remaining yolk supply or until it is able to regulate its own body temperature.

2 Nestling: A bird that remains nest-bound until able to fly.

3 Chick: A young bird that leaves the nest soon after hatching and typically wanders by walking in a family group until able to fly.

4 Fledgling: A bird able to fly but still dependant upon parents for food and other care.

5 Juvenile: A young bird incapable of breeding and in its first plumage of non-downy feathers. These are mostly soft feathers that quickly wear and must be replaced.

6 Immature: A young bird capable of breeding and in its first plumage of hard feathers gained after molting its soft feathers, but not yet identical either in pattern or color to adult feathers. "Subadult" is a synonym of "immature."

Gulls are well known for their diverse immature plumages; but many birds exhibit no immature stage, going directly from juvenile to adult when they replace their soft feathers.

7 Adult: A mature bird capable of breeding and in a plumage that no longer changes in appearance with successive molts. (With the exception, of course, of birds that change plumage between winter and summer, such as American Goldfinches.)

MASLOWSKI WILDLIFE PRODUCTIONS

American Robin hatchling.

BILL THOMPSON, III

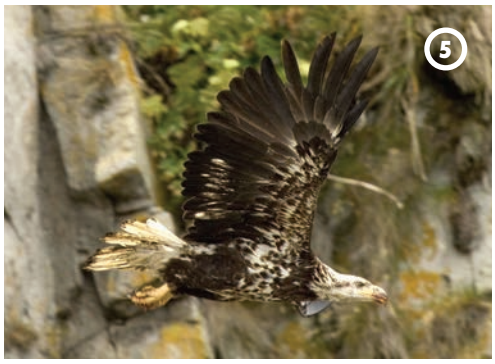
Bluebird nestlings.

USFWS

Northern Pintail chick.

BILL THOMPSON, III

A bluebird fledgling with its parent.

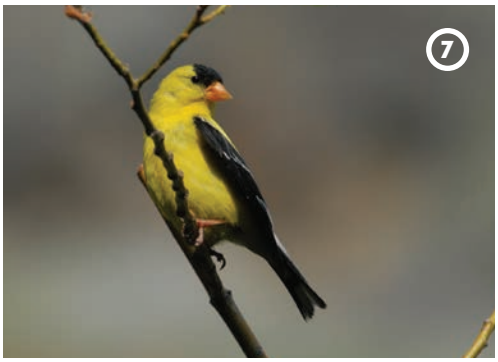


STEVE HILLEBRAND/USFWS

Juvenile Bald Eagle.

LEE KARNEY/USFWS

An immature Red-tailed Hawk.



DAVE MENKE/USFWS

An adult male American Goldfinch in breeding plumage.

Historical bird literature reveals that ornithologists have not always used terms consistently and occasionally overlooked specifically defining certain terms.

by BILL THOMPSON, III

10 Things I'll Watch for in My Backyard This Winter

Even though it's 90 degrees F outside as I write this column on an overcast October afternoon, I already am looking forward to some of the things winter will hold in store. Here's what's on my mind today about the chilly tomorrows ahead.

I like the anticipation of fall. At our place fall migration is almost always better than spring migration—we get more birds, and we get more unusual birds. The only thing missing is fresh spring plumage and the symphony of singing males. To ensure that you get the most out of this fall's migration, I offer these suggestions for the birds in your backyard.

10 Mild of hard winter. The wooly bear caterpillars are all solid black this fall. I see them crossing the road as I drive to work, and crossing our yard at home. All black is supposed to mean we'll have a really harsh winter. I'm not sure about the science behind this, but we could sure use a lot of snow and rain this winter. It's been a bad drought here this summer in southeastern Ohio and everything has suffered from the lack of water. Mild winters (like last winter) give us different backyard birds than do harsh winters. If this coming winter is to be harsh, the signs may already be appearing—and not just from the colors of the wooly bears.

9 Red-breasted Nuthatches. So far this fall we've had record numbers of Red-breasted Nuthatches—they're even visiting our feeders! Normally this tiny pine specialist from the North passes through our area but does not linger. There must have been a super seed crop in the North to produce so many "nutties." Or possibly the seed crop was large last year and tiny this year. For whatever reason, this winter looks to be a record-setter in terms of Red-breasted Nuthatches.

8 Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers. We've also seen more than a dozen Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers around our farm this past month. We always hope that one or more will linger to peck at our old trees, and dine on our peanuts and suet. I love sapsuckers—they are elegant birds to watch. Their swooping flying style reminds me of how cuckoos fly. The sapsucker numbers could also be a predictor of cold weather ahead.

7 Purple Finches. The *pit-pit-pit* of Purple Finches is already a regular morning sound around our feeders. Some winters we barely see any of this beautiful wine-colored finch on our farm. We always wonder if it's because the natural food crop of seeds and fruits is so abundant that the finches don't need to visit the feeders for sunflower seed. This year looks to be a good year for Purple Finches, which now outnumber the House Finches at our feeders.

6 Common Redpolls. If it's a finch invasion winter, then this is among our most hoped-for visitors. We've had redpolls at the feeders here in southeastern Ohio about once every decade, dating back to the mid-1970s. The northern seed crop has to really crash in order for this tiny finch with the red beret and tiny bill to make it this far south. When they do come, they come in large numbers. Despite their small size, they can empty the feeders in no time.

5 Evening Grosbeaks. And speaking of pigs at the feeder, the Evening Grosbeak, another infrequent visitor to our farm, is in a class by itself. We usually hear Evening Grosbeaks going over, calling kleeer! Often one of a flock will land in the top of a huge tulip poplar and glance down at our feeders. This large finch prefers to feed at a platform feeder, so we try to keep the right offerings out from Halloween until Mother's Day in hopes of coaxing these striking yellow birds to stop to eat.


Northern Cardinal.

4 Cardinal numbers. No matter how harsh or mellow the winter, we already know our cardinal numbers will be high. They had a great breeding season, as evidenced by all the dark-billed juvenile birds around the yard right now. On the first snowy day we'll certainly count more than 100 Northern Cardinals at our various feeders, making every snow-covered tree look like it's full of bright red apples.

3 Roosting bluebirds. A friend of mine teased me a few Octobers back, when he saw me winterizing our bluebird boxes with weather stripping. "Why don't you put in a heating pad, too, Bill?" Believe me, I thought about it. Many cavity nesters use our bluebird boxes as nighttime roosts in winter. But on the coldest nights of the winter, as many as a dozen of our bluebirds may crowd into a single nest box, sharing body heat to survive the night. So we do all we can to make sure they are as warm as possible. This includes plugging the boxes' vent holes with weather stripping and placing a cup of dried grass on the floor of the box for extra insulation.

2 Turkey flock. We're already spreading scoop-fulls of cracked corn under the pines. Any day now the Wild Turkeys will start showing up. The young females come first, one brave bird getting a crop of corn while the others watch from deep cover. Soon the rest of the flock shows up for the smorgasbord. We've had as many as 20 turkeys scratching and pecking below our pines. But we only put out enough corn for a few hours' feeding. We don't want them to get too used to humans. After all, turkey season in this part of the world is a big deal! By early spring, when the gobblers start displaying, the flock disperses to the wooded hills and hollows.

1 Hermit Thrushes. Harsh winter or not, we always have a few Hermit Thrushes wintering here. Their soft tchuk! calls on a still, sunny winter day alert us to look for them in the sumac tangle or the grape vines where they are eating the remaining fruits. They seem such a delicate bird to last the winter long here. When heavy snow comes, they stick to the deep woods and forage for grubs and insects in the duff along our woodland streams. On sunny mornings they climb to the ridge-top edge habitat where fruits of sumac, greenbrier, dogwood, bittersweet, cherry, and grape can be found. Somehow seeing a Hermit Thrush on our farm makes the winter seem less cold and dreary. So you can bet I'll be looking and listening sharply for this special winter bird.

Frequently Asked

Q's

by Kevin Cook

Q: At a bird feeding workshop several years ago, a speaker suggested planting oaks so that squirrels will have acorns to eat and will stop bothering my bird feeders. I planted two oaks five years ago and now have nice trees but no acorns. Did I plant the wrong oaks?

A: If you bought your trees from a garden shop or nursery, you probably got trees that were about 10–12 years old, which would make them something under 20 years old now. Most oaks don't start producing acorns until they are 25–30 years old, and some oak species don't start producing acorns until they reach or pass 50 years.

Your trees may need just a few more years or possibly another decade before they start producing acorns. Any other tree species that bears fruits or seeds that squirrels will eat—hawthorn, plum apple, maple—will need at least three to five years in the ground to start producing.

To decoy the squirrels now, offer them corn on or off the cob in their own feeder and place it away from your bird feeders. You can also plant multiple patches of sunflowers and corn and disperse the patches in nooks and crannies. The giant sunflowers with the huge heads are okay, but the regular wild type will produce more small heads that will preoccupy the squirrels far longer.

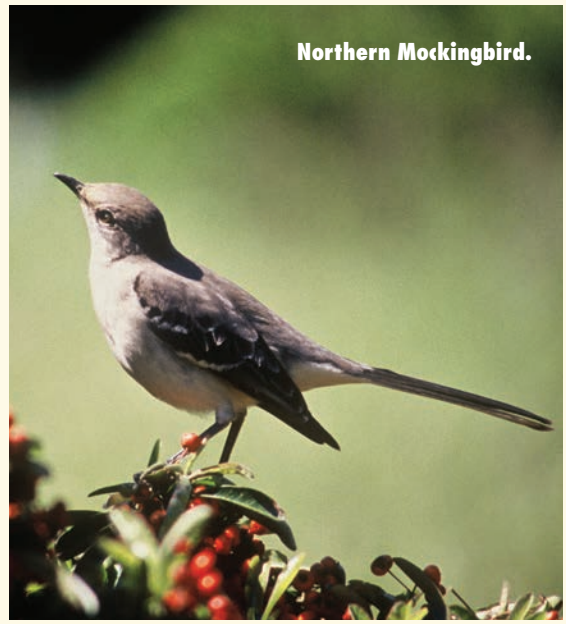
Q: I planted both Virginia creeper and cherry to provide winter food for birds in my yard. Both are well developed and producing fruit now; but by the time autumn came and all the leaves fell, the berries and cherries were gone with none left for winter. What should I do?

A: Cherries are a summer fruit eaten by thrushes, robins, bluebirds, thrashers, starlings, waxwings, blackbirds, orioles, and a lot of other birds. Creepers are an autumn fruit, and I have seen 37 bird species eating the fruits just in my yard.

That fruits are being produced in your yard and are getting eaten clearly indicates you are doing nothing wrong except expecting them to last longer into the year than they naturally will.

For winter-durable fruits readily eaten by birds, consider the pome-bearing species in the rose family: hawthorns, serviceberries (locally called "juneberries"), crabapples, Ussurian pear, and the various rowans (variously known as "mountain-ashes" or "beam-trees").

If you live in an area naturally grown with native junipers, juniper cones—erroneously called "juniper berries"—make an excellent winter food for Townsend's Solitaire, American Robin, bluebirds, thrashers, Northern Mockingbirds, and several others.



Northern Mockingbird.

LEE KARNEY/USFWS

Q: I forgot a bird feeder and left it hanging unused in a tree all summer. While doing some autumn yard work, I rediscovered the feeder and found it almost completely covered with gray papery material that looked like a beehive or a wasp nest or something. What would do this, will they do it again, and can the bird feeder still be used if cleaned or is it ruined?

A: Bald-faced hornets build paper nests in trees, but they enclose the cells so that they are not usually visible from the outside. Yellow-jackets build paper-celled nests but almost always at or below ground level. Various paper-wasps build discrete little hanging nests. I suspect your bird feeder was taken over by European paper-wasps, which closely resemble yellow-jackets. They started on the inside and through the summer kept building and expanding to the outside.

They are finished with the nest in autumn and won't use it again. Now that it's winter, they have abandoned the nest and you can clean your bird feeder and rehang it.

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BirdWatcher's Digest

In every issue of *BirdTracks* we feature questions from you, our best customers. We welcome your suggestions, comments and questions. We also hope to share your tips and ideas for enhancing our enjoyment of backyard birds and wildlife with other *BirdTracks* readers all over North America.

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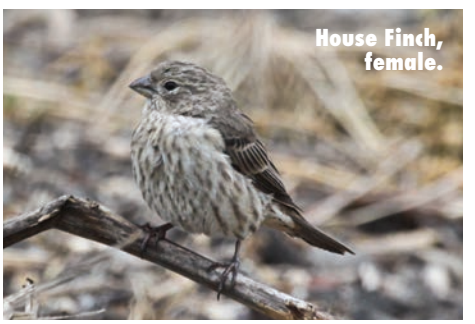
Purple vs. House Finches— *Continued from page 1*

BILL THOMPSON, III



ALVARO JARAMILLO

ing into dull white. This difference is especially evident in the faces of the two female finches. A dark cheek patch encircled in white sets the Purple Finch apart. The female House Finch's face is dull and evenly colored.

Overall appearance

In overall appearance the Purple Finch looks more substantial, plumper, and chestier. Purples often appear to have a slight crest of feathers on their head, unlike the flat-crowned House Finch. At feeders, Purple Finches are calmer and will perch quietly in one place to eat while the flightier House Finches flutter and tweet incessantly.

Songs

The songs of both species are rich, rapid, and musical, but the Purple Finch's song lacks the harsh, burry downward slurred notes that the House Finch inserts into every song.