



## RED CROSSBILL WINTER

Helen Thigpen

Certain participants of the Christmas bird count sat eagerly awaiting Tom Imhof's tally of the American Goldfinch, so they could reveal what they expected to be the surprise write-in of the day--Red Crossbills. It was an even greater sensation than they had anticipated, for two parties reported them near Lake Purdy (one saw a flock of 30), while another party had previous sightings from the Vestavia area.

Thus began "Red Crossbill Winter" and numbers of Birmingham birders took advantage of this rare opportunity to observe these northern visitors frequently throughout the season. According to Tom Imhof's statistics, this is only the fourth winter in the last fifteen that they have been reported in the state and the second year recorded in Birmingham.

Red Crossbills were sighted December 24, 1973, feeding in Virginia pines on the south slope of Shades Mountain and were seen almost daily in that vicinity until mid-April. Seeds from the many Virginia pines in this area seem to have composed their principal diet, since they were only rarely seen feeding on other conifers. On a few occasions some appeared to be removing and eating small insects from twigs and buds of other trees, and on two occasions a female was observed eating sunflower seeds at a bird feeder.

At the time of the Crossbill's appearance in December and continuing through January into February, most of the days were overcast, with dense fog or rain. During this gloomy weather, the Red Crossbills sometimes fed on the lower branches only eight or ten feet from the ground and permitted human approach without alarm. But attempts at photography gave disappointing results, due to the fog and poor lighting. By the time photographic conditions improved, the Crossbills were feeding higher.

Except in very rainy weather, the birds made daily visits to one observer's bird bath, with as many as sixteen birds in it at one time.

Flocks of Pine Siskins were often associated with the Crossbills. The striking similarity of Pine Siskin and juvenile Red Crossbill plumage was demonstrated when Tom Imhof banded one of each on January 13, 1974. Helen Kittinger photographed them. The juvenile Crossbill probably hatched in October. One wonders if its nest was in the Bankhead Forest where Red Crossbills were known to be last winter and spring.

The measurements of this juvenile and seven adult males and females banded by Mr. Imhof at the same location in February indicate that they belong to one of the smaller Red Crossbill races, whereas one collected in Mississippi about 125 miles away was of a larger race.

The invasion seems to have been widespread, for sightings were reported from many areas--Walker County, Little River Canyon, Bankhead Forest, Rocky Ridge, Mountain Brook, Adamsville, Phenix City and Tannehill State Park.

The flocks were initially rather large (30 or more), but began diminishing in size until only 6 or 8 were usually seen together. Finally only one was reported at the annual spring bird count in Birmingham on April 27.

And so goodbye to the Red Crossbills for now, but the experience gained by many Birmingham birders during "Red Crossbill Winter" should guard against their next appearance going unnoticed.

## BANDERS' CORNER

James V. Peavy, Jr.

From a bird-banding point of view, this winter was a particularly exciting one. Early in the season the banders in the Birmingham area were treated to a visit from Dr. Val Nolan of Indiana State University. Dr. Nolan, along with two graduate students, came to Alabama to study wintering Juncos. With the help of local birders, especially Percy and Helen Thigpen, Harriett Wright, Bob Reid and Tom Imhof, Dr. Nolan was able to capture and band enough Juncos in three days to make his trip successful. At the same time those of us fortunate enough to be with him learned a great deal about the natural history of Juncos. In conjunction with the Junco study, Tom Imhof was netting birds at the Thigpen home and while there caught a Red Crossbill, the first ever banded in Alabama; later, he banded seven more. For more on Red Crossbills, see the article in this issue by Helen Thigpen.

For me the most exciting event of the winter occurred on February 3, 1974, when Tom Imhof, Ted Weems and I set out to band shore birds. The shore bird banding fell through because there were no birds to speak of when we reached our planned netting site. As we had already driven nearly 100 miles, Tom suggested that we check out a report he had received concerning a large flock of Purple Finches. So we drove on to Collirene, Ala. to look at an unharvested sorghum field. When we arrived we were astonished by the vast number of birds. We later estimated the Purple Finches alone numbered at least 5000, with many more birds of other species also feeding in one twenty-acre field. Quickly setting up our nets, we banded birds from 10:30 a.m. until 6:30 p.m. During this time we banded 380 Purple Finches, 14 Juncos, 8 Pine Siskins, 1 White-throated Sparrow, 12 Savannah Sparrows, 3 Field Sparrows, 13 Song Sparrows, 1 Vesper Sparrow and 1 Bobwhite for a total of 443 birds banded in eight hours. The only limit to the number of birds we could band was how fast we could remove them from the net and band them.

Another interesting bird banded this winter was a Western Tanager which I banded at Ft. Morgan on February 17.