



Pine Siskin and American Goldfinch courtesy of Amy Hodson. Purple Finch courtesy of Mike Timmons.

Winter Finch Forecast – What Does it Mean for Indiana?

By Aidan Rominger

north. This is not an annual species for Indiana, but when pushing southward, can be quite abundant.

Then the forecast covers Common Redpoll and Hoary Redpoll. These colorful winter finches erupt southward during years of swamp birch crop failure. Redpolls are known to push southward in massive flocks of hundreds of individuals in search of food. This species commonly shows up to feeders and enjoys thistle as well as sunflower seeds. When Redpolls have invaded the state in the past, they tend to show up most commonly to feeders along the lakeshore, with occasional flocks occurring at random sunflower plots throughout the state.

The next finch species listed is the Pine Siskin. Pine Siskins have been known to push south during years of poor spruce crops. Like Redpolls, siskins enjoy thistle feeders and can occur in flocks of hundreds of birds when forced southward after the failure of a cone crop. This species is an annual visitor during the winter months in Indiana showing up to thistle feeders and sunflower plots in winter.

The last finch species recorded in the forecast is perhaps my personal favorite, the Evening Grosbeak. This large colorful finch erupts southward due to spruce crop failures and may occur in small to medium-sized flocks in the lower 48 during the winter. Historically, Evening Grosbeaks were one of the most abundant winter finch species to show up in the state. They were known for devastating feeders of their sunflower seeds in a single day. However, during the early 1990s, the eastern population of Evening Grosbeak crashed for unforeseen reasons. Today, the species is a very rare and seldom visitor to the state.

The forecast also predicts the movements of other highly irruptive boreal passerines such as Bohemian Waxwings, which push south during mountain ash failures, and Red-breasted Nuthatches, which push south due to spruce failures.

Over the past three years, Indiana had a moderate to slightly above average push of winter finches within the state. The most recent irruption being the invasion of Red Crossbills in the fall and winter of 2017. While it has been over two years since the state has had any major irruptions, the predictions for the 2021 Winter Finch Forecast seem to be very promising.

According to Tyler Hoar, the new author of the finch forecast appointed by Ronn Pittway, this year will host a very good push of Purple Finches, Pine Siskins, Red-breasted Nuthatches, and lastly, Evening Grosbeaks. According to Tyler, many of these species seem to be pushing south due to an outbreak of Spruce Budworm causing the seed crops to fail in large numbers across the boreal forest.

Indiana has already seen impressive numbers of Purple Finches arriving in early fall 2020. I recorded my personal high count of 50+ individual Purple Finches at the Purdue Wildlife Area this fall, meaning the prediction for this species was spot on. Red-breasted Nuthatches have also been pushing through the state in large numbers, some individuals already reaching as far south as Evansville. Both Purple Finch and Red-breasted Nuthatch can be attracted to feeders with black oil sunflower seeds.

Pine Siskins have recently pushed into the state with hundreds of individuals being recorded in the Great Lakes region within recent weeks. This species can be easily identified by its high pitched shrill call and will come down to feeders filled with thistle.

As winter quickly approaches, many Midwestern birders wait eagerly with fully stocked feeders in the hopes of attracting one of the many boreal finch species. Occasionally, some species are forced southward for the winter in search of food. For the past 20 years, a local Ontario birder named Ronn Pittway has written the only reliable “Winter Finch Forecast” in existence. The forecast uses data collected by local birders and foresters in Ontario’s Algonquin Park who track cone crop failures to determine which finch species will push southward in search of food.

This forecast has been the most reliable way to predict which irruptive boreal species will show up within the lower 48 states throughout any given winter. The Winter Finch Forecast showcases 10 species of highly irruptive boreal passerines that each rely heavily on the prevalence of cone and seed crops to survive.

The first species the forecast discusses is Pine Grosbeaks. Unlike many winter finches, Pine Grosbeaks heavily rely on the presence of mountain ash seeds, and will occasionally push southward if the presence of these seeds become scarce. This species rarely seems to push into Indiana, with only a handful of records for the state but is always possible.

Second in the forecast is the Purple Finch. Purple Finches push south during migration, but also breed within Canada and as far south as Michigan. This species occurs annually during the winter months in Indiana. However, they can be easier to find during some winters than others.

Next is the Red Crossbill. This highly nomadic winter finch relies heavily on the presence of various pine cones. Depending on the subspecies, Red Crossbills may push southward based on the status of those cone crops. This species rarely visits feeders, but has occurred in great numbers at Indiana Dunes State Park, and is typically an annual migrant within the state.

The next species covered is the White-winged Crossbill. This species of winter finch is not as nomadic as Red Crossbill but will push southward during years where spruce cone crops have crashed. White-winged Crossbills are rare visitors to Indiana and only push this far south during years of great spruce failure in the

Upcoming Audubon Events and Field Trips

All are free and open to the public unless otherwise noted. Due to the coronavirus outbreak, all of these events are subject to cancellation. Please check our website event calendar before attending an event to see if it might have been canceled. Once restrictions are softened, we might also schedule last-minute events.

Virtual Monthly Programs

We are pleased to announce that we are starting virtual programs. You must register for the programs through Eventbrite. This will be easiest to link to through the event post on the ABAS Calendar. Once registered, you will receive an email with a link to the Zoom meeting prior to the program.



Roger Hedge and Scott Namestnik, Indiana Natural Heritage Data biologists, monitoring rare plants at Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge in southeast Indiana. Photo courtesy of Joe Robb.

Indiana's Rare Plants

Tuesday, November 10, 7:30 pm to 9:00 pm

Eventbrite:

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/123747228291>

Join Roger Hedge for an online program about Indiana's rare plants. From oak savannas, prairies, dunes, and natural lakes of northern Indiana, to southern Indiana's forested hills, glades, barrens, and cypress swamps, our state has a rich biodiversity. These and other Indiana natural communities support a spectacular array of plant and animal species, including nearly 450 vascular plants that are considered endangered or threatened in the state. Many of these species occur on dedicated state nature preserves and other public lands.

The Indiana Natural Heritage Data Center in the Division of Nature Preserves, Department of Natural Resources, tracks and monitors these rare species and high-quality natural communities. Roger Hedge is an ecologist and botanist with the data center. His primary duties include searching for and monitoring these natural features. Enjoy an armchair tour of some of Indiana's finest natural areas and the rare species they support.

This will be an online program using Zoom. Participants will register using Eventbrite and there will be a limit of 100. To register go to <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/indianas-rare-plants-tickets-123747228291>. Once we are close to the program date, you will receive an email with an invite to a Zoom meeting.

Guatemala - A Birder's Paradise

Tuesday, December 8, 7:30 pm to 9:00 pm

Eventbrite: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/guatemala-a-birders-paradise-tickets-123749555251>

Join ABAS President and Sabrewing Nature Tours owner, Rob Ripma, as he takes us on a photographic journey through the incredible country of Guatemala. Not only is Guatemala a birder's paradise with species such as Pink-headed Warbler and Horned Guan, it's also one of the best countries in Central America to experience the ancient Mayan culture. From the UNESCO World Heritage site of Antigua to the ancient Tikal ruins, there are numerous fascinating cultural and historic sites to see.



Combine that with a wonderful diversity of birds, and Guatemala is a country that you don't want to miss!

This will be an online program using Zoom. Participants will register using Eventbrite and there will be a limit of 100. To register go to <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/guatemala-a-birders-paradise-tickets-123749555251>. Once we are close to the program date, you will receive an email with an invite to a Zoom meeting.

Pink-headed Warbler courtesy of Rob Ripma

ABAS Field Trip Recaps

Strawtown Koteewi Park Field Trip

September 5, 2020

We had a total of 17 people attend the birding field trip to Strawtown Koteewi. It was led by renowned local birder, Terry Ballenger. Weather conditions couldn't have been nicer for this event. We saw a total of 33 species of birds highlighted by a Philadelphia Vireo, an Ovenbird and a very close-up, extended view of a Black-throated Green Warbler. Watch for another ABAS field trip to Strawtown Koteewi during the 2021 spring migration.



Birders birding on the Strawtown Field Trip

Conner Prairie Field Trip **September 19, 2020**

Twelve birders joined Zach White, Conner Prairie Senior Manager of Camps and Recreation, for a bird hike. The temperature was a cool 41 degrees at the start, but the skies were clear and enthusiasm was high. We broke into two groups, one led by Becky Lomax-Sumner and the second by Laurie Voss. Both are experienced leaders. Birds seen included 9 warbler species, highlighted by Black-throated Green Warbler, Magnolia Warbler and Common Yellowthroat. Of special interest were a pair of Osprey, two American Bald Eagles and a screeching, immature Great Horned Owl. A total of 44 birds were recorded for the day. We look forward to hosting another field trip at Conner Prairie in the future.



Birders birding on the Strawtown Field Trip

Masks on Hikes and Limited Numbers

It is anticipated that masks will be required for the majority of all field trips and local hikes. There may be times when we can spread out and get a quick break from the masks. Many hikes will also have a limit to the number of participants and require registration. Please check the details of each hike and register as appropriate.

Sandhill Cranes at Jasper-Pulaski

Saturday, November 14, 4:00 pm to 6:00 pm
Jasper-Pulaski FWA Headquarters
5822 Fish & Wildlife Lane, Medaryville, IN

Join ABAS Field Trip Chair, Chuck Anderson, for a trip to Jasper-Pulaski Fish & Wildlife Area (FWA). This will be a great opportunity to view thousands of Sandhill Cranes as they congregate in Goose Pasture before returning to the roosting marshes. There's always a possibility of spotting a Whooping Crane among the Sandhills.

We'll meet at 4:00 pm at the Sandhill Crane Observation Platform parking lot located on County Rd 1650W, one mile past the park's headquarters entrance. Follow the very visible signage. Bring binoculars and a spotting scope, if you have one. This will also be a great opportunity to photograph the birds in flight as they pass over the viewing platform.

Dress appropriately for the weather. Outhouses are available near the viewing platform.

There is no fee for the trip. However, it is limited to 10 participants, and registration is required. Email Chuck at chucka1999@aol.com or text (317) 767-5438 to reserve your spot on the field trip.

Masks will likely be required during most of the viewing as this is a very popular location for observing the cranes.



Sandhill Cranes courtesy of Chuck Anderson.

Fall Birding At Goose Pond **CURRENTLY FULL**

Saturday, November 21, 3:00 pm to 8:00 pm
Goose Pond FWA Visitor Center
13570 West County Road 400 South, Linton, IN

Join accomplished birders Whitney and Jonathan Yoerger for a late afternoon field trip to Goose Pond Fish & Wildlife Area (FWA) in search of waterfowl and raptors. In addition to viewing multiple species of ducks and geese, we should see Northern Harriers hunting low over the fields. Just before dusk, Short-eared Owls will likely appear.

Meet at the Goose Pond Visitor's Center parking lot at 3:00 pm.

There is no fee for the field trip and it's open to the public.

There is a limit of 10 participants and registration is required. Since this field trip is currently full, mail Whitney at whitney.yoerger@gmail.com to be put on the waiting list if an opening pops up.

The majority of the field trip will be by car with multiple stops to get out to view birds. As always, bring your binoculars and spotting scope if you have one.

Masks will be required when birding in close proximity to others.



Short-eared Owl courtesy of Chuck Anderson

Local Bird Hikes

Due to the coronavirus outbreak, all of these events are subject to cancellation. Please check our website event calendar before attending an event to see if it might have been canceled. Once restrictions are softened, we might also schedule last-minute events.

Masks on Hikes

It is anticipated that masks will be required for the majority of the local hikes. There may be times when we can spread out and get a quick break from the masks.

- Eagle Creek Park hikes are canceled until further notice.

Holliday Park

6363 Spring Mill Road, Indianapolis, IN
Third Tuesday of each month
Start times vary during the year
November 17, 8:30 am to 10:00 am
December 15, 8:30 am to 10:00 am

Meet in front of the Nature Center.

Newfields Bird Hike

1550 West 38th Street, Indianapolis, IN
Saturday, December 5, 8:00 am to 10:00 am

Join ABAS and Newfields for bird hikes on this beautiful property along the White River and Central Canal. Meet at Lake Terrace in the Virginia B. Fairbanks Art & Nature Park: 100 Acres. Registration is requested by emailing us at info@amosbutleraudubon.org.

Christmas Bird Counts

We don't have details yet, though we expect these will all still occur with some special considerations due to the coronavirus outbreak. Please check our website for the dates and details as we gather them. You can also expect information in our December email.



Working to Preserve Habitat in NE Indy

Mud Creek Conservancy works to preserve habitat and create Sargent Road Nature Park

By Ben Miller
President, Mud Creek Conservancy



Left to right: Prairie Warbler, Great Horned Owllet, Connecticut Warbler, Prothonotary Warbler, Blue-headed Vireo. Photos courtesy of Ben Miller.

Mud Creek Conservancy (MCC), an Indiana 501(c)3 not-for-profit corporation and “hyper-local” land trust is raising funds to purchase a 25-acre natural area at the corner of 82nd Street and Sargent Road in northeast Indianapolis. This effort will mark the first land acquisition for MCC, historically preserving urban habitat through conservation easements over its 25 years of work. Through this volunteer-led and community-funded initiative, MCC plans to permanently preserve this rare, undeveloped, urban habitat and create Sargent Road Nature Park (SRNP), offering central Indiana residents a conveniently accessible nature preserve with a one-mile loop trail for nature-based recreation and a convenient environmental education destination for local K-12 students. This property has remained a high priority parcel for environmental protection since our organizations’ inception and has been for sale and under greater threat of development in recent years. In September 2019, MCC negotiated a two-year option with the property owners of this 25-acre parcel to raise funds to purchase and preserve this property while it remains off the market.

While natural habitats have been rapidly degraded and lost across Indianapolis, this site contains high-quality and diverse habitats including mature bottomland and riparian forests, wetlands, meadows, and young forests. Over 700 yards of Mud Creek (a tributary to Fall Creek and the White River) also borders the property. This parcel is located within a well-connected corridor of natural habitat, extending from Ft. Harrison State Park to Fall Creek Road to 96th Street (MCC’s preservation priority area). Anchored by the state parkland and the Fall Creek Greenway to the south, the Mud Creek watershed extends north along Sargent Road and contains many rare and unique habitat types and topography.

The combination of diverse habitats and a connection to a much larger 2,000+ acre natural area make this property a match made in heaven for both birds and bird-watchers. A few birds of the over 100 bird species that have been observed at the site over the past year include Great Horned Owlets, Prairie Warblers, Blue-headed Vireos, Golden-winged Warblers, Red-headed Woodpecker, Connecticut Warblers, Philadelphia Vireos, Sharp-shinned Hawks, and American Woodcock. During a fall migration birding hike and fundraiser with Wes Homoya and Wood Warbler Coffee, over 52 species, including 12 warbler species, were observed on a two hour, one-mile hike of the property. With fewer natural areas present

in Indianapolis, protecting this property will have immediate and lasting impacts. This site also supports an abundance of wildlife species including amphibians and reptiles like slimy salamanders, eastern box turtles (special concern) and Kirtland’s snakes (state-endangered), mammals like beavers, fox, coyote, deer and mink, and many native pollinators, including the imperiled monarch butterfly. We believe it is important to preserve diverse wildlife and plant populations for their own well-being as well as the enjoyment and wonder they provide to residents and visitors.

MCC’s site plan includes a small parking area and a low-impact nature trail with interpretive displays that will support activities like walking, jogging, bird-watching, and environmental education. Environmental protections will be placed on the property to ensure permanent habitat preservation and allow for future restorations. These 25 acres complement five adjacent MCC conservation easements protecting an additional four acres of habitat. The Sargent Road Nature Park initiative is a volunteer-led and community-supported initiative that addresses three major objectives and needs: Preservation, Education, and Recreation.

Join Mud Creek Conservancy: We hope Indianapolis residents, organizations, and businesses will consider supporting this important community initiative that will provide many lasting benefits to our city. You can learn more about this initiative, take a virtual tour, donate or contact us at SargentRoadNaturePark.com Follow us on Facebook and Instagram @MudCreekConservancy for project updates, tour opportunities, nature education posts, and wildlife photos from the area.

Winter Finch Forecast

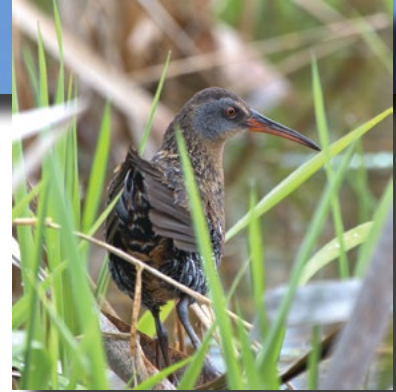
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Lastly, Evening Grosbeaks are predicted to be the species that pushes the most this winter season, making them a likely candidate to show up at a feeder near you in the coming months. Evening Grosbeaks tend to favor black oil sunflower seeds, and can be found at a wide variety of feeder types. Watch for large greenish yellow finches with heavy curved bills, and white wing patches.

Despite the fall migrants leaving our backyards, winter finches give a whole new meaning to birding during the cold winter months. Since many of these largely nomadic winter finches only push south on occasion, irruption years provide birders with a rare opportunity to see these northern species close to home. Given the prediction of the 2021 Winter Finch Forecast, it is imperative to pay close attention to any and every finch you see this winter. So keep those feeders stocked and get ready for a great finch season!

Behind the Lens: Mark Welter

Note from the Editor: For this issue, we wanted to feature Indy birder and bird photographer, Mark Welter. Mark takes beautiful photos of birds and can be found as a featured artist in many of the Friends of Goose Pond calendars.



Photos from top and left to right: American White Pelican, Short-eared Owl, Bay-breasted Warbler, Virginia Rail. All photos courtesy of Mark Welter.

Editor: When did you know that you were going to pursue capturing photographs of birds?

MARK: I have been taking photos of birds since I got back into birding in 2012, after an almost 30-year hiatus. I decided to get more serious about taking good photos of birds a couple of years after that when I started hanging around with some birders who were also very talented photographers.

Editor: Is there a specific species that sparked your interest in photography?

MARK: Not really. My goal with photographing birds has primarily been to document and share what I see in the field. That being the case, I'll shoot about anything that cooperates.

Editor: Winter photography is right around the corner. What is your favorite aspect of taking photographs during the winter? What tips do you have?

MARK: My favorite aspect of winter photography is that there aren't any leaves on the trees so the birds are easier to see. The biggest tip I have is that when you're shooting from inside your vehicle as a blind, as one often does when it's cold and nasty outside, turn off the engine and get your lens as far outside the car as you can, in order to minimize blurring due to vibration and heat distortion.

Editor: What is the best tip you have learned about bird photography?

MARK: Post-processing is where the real magic happens. Looking back through my old photos, you can see where I started to figure this out. I don't edit for aesthetic reasons, removing twigs, cloning things out, replacing backgrounds, and applying lots of effects, but I have salvaged a lot of photos that were garbage when they came out of the camera.

Editor: What photograph are you the proudest of, and why?

MARK: I don't consider myself a serious photographer, or even a very good one, and I don't have a single photograph I can point to and go "that's my best one." However, I am very proud that a photograph of mine has been selected for inclusion in the Friends of Goose Pond calendar every year for the past five years. It's an honor because Goose Pond is near and dear to my heart personally, as well as being one of the most renowned birding destinations in the state of Indiana.

Editor: What is something you wish you had known as a beginning photographer that you know now?

MARK: Get better gear than you think you need; you'll grow into it.

Editor: How are you planning your next adventure as a bird photographer in the midst of a global pandemic?

MARK: You don't need to plan big adventures. Opportunities for bird photography are all around. A lot of folks have used the pandemic-induced travel restrictions and event cancellations as an opportunity to rediscover birding and photography at their local parks, favorite eBird hotspots, and even their own backyards. That said, I really hope next year sees a return to some semblance of normalcy in the birding world. I have a couple of trips lined up that I am really looking forward to.

Editor: If you could travel anywhere in the world to photograph birds, where would you go?

MARK: I have a lot of places and birds to see in the US yet. South Texas, southeastern Arizona, south Florida, and the Pacific Northwest are all on my shortlist.

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Birdathon Completes an Online Auction

In late September 73 items were sold in the first-ever online auction for the benefit of Birdathon. Almost \$4,000 was raised towards funding next year's grantees which will be determined in March. Our thanks to all who helped make this auction successful, especially those who donated items and purchased them.

Special Donations

In memory of Margaret L. Reisert by

Tabitha Cooper

Emily Wray

Brad Smith & Stella Schafer

Valerie Boggs

Larry & Sandra Black

Bill & Vicky Bailey

All who use Amazon Smile to benefit ABAS

Lifetime Memberships

All lifetime memberships go to the Permanent Fund. Lifetime individual membership is only \$500 and it is fitting that it goes to the long-run benefit of ABAS. The Permanent Fund can never be spent. Similar to an endowment, the goal is that investment proceeds can be spent as the Board of Directors determines. Any donation throughout the year can be directed towards the Permanent Fund as well.

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Our mission: To promote the enjoyment and stewardship of the birds of Central Indiana

Amos Butler Audubon Society

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