

A DASH OF ROSE AND A HINT OF SUNSET

by Terry Sprague

The date is August 27, 1972. Several members of the Kingston Field Naturalists are having a good day birding at Prince Edward Point. Purple Finches are everywhere, the raspberry coats of the males striking against a backdrop of shagbark hickory and ironwood. Their numbers suggest an autumn movement of the species through this popular migration point at the eastern tip of South Marysburgh Township.

The less spectacular brown females are around, their white eyebrows offsetting the heavy sparrow-like streaking. Suddenly a somewhat different female comes into view, this one lighter in colour with finer streaks and lacking the white line through the eye which readily identifies a female Purple Finch. Dr. Ronald Weir, a chemical engineer at Kingston's Royal Military College and author of the recently published *Birds of the Kingston Region*, and co-author of *Birds of Prince Edward County*, is on hand this day. Veteran Kingston birder and author, Helen Quilliam is also present and armed with binoculars. They identify the stranger as a female House Finch, the first ever for the province of Ontario.

Little did they know, as they recorded the details of their discovery and headed back to Kingston, that in less than 20 years the House Finch would be among the most abundant guests at bird feeding stations along the northern shores of Lake Ontario and Lake Erie.

The story of the phenomenal spread of this species began in 1940 when cagebird dealers in California sent a small shipment of House Finches, caught in the wild, to dealers in New York City for sale as "Hollywood Finches." Since this was a flagrant violation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service promptly put an end to it.

The birds were released on Long Island, where they proceeded to pair up and multiply. Within a few years, sightings began to occur up and down the eastern seaboard, and homeowners were captivated by these colourful exotics. After their initial appearance at Prince Edward Point, residents along the Lake Erie shoreline were delighted when their first individual turned up four years later.

With habits similar to those of the House Sparrow, these new arrivals began popping up in towns and villages all along the lakeshore. By 1978, they were nesting at Niagara-on-the-Lake. It wasn't until 1980, however, that the population literally exploded in the Kingston area. Hundreds of reports flooded in from bird feeder watchers, curious about these new arrivals. Nests were turning up on vine-covered buildings, in ornamental evergreen trees, under eaves, and in hanging flower pots. The scattered breeding pairs during that first year or two at Kingston had expanded to over 250 breeding pairs by

1985. By 1988, an estimated 1,000 pairs of House Finches had nested within the Kingston area.

In Picton, the story was similar. *Birds of Prince Edward County* (Sprague and Weir, 1984) detailed every sighting since 1982, and the first recorded nesting in 1983. They had become something of a novelty in Picton. But, like House Sparrows, they were not inclined to travel far from urban areas, and were totally absent in the rural communities. As their population increased, small numbers began turning up at rural bird feeders three years later. In just another two or three years, populations numbering as high as 250 were not uncommon at winter bird feeding stations everywhere.

Today their expansion continues unabated, now ranging as far north as Marathon, near Thunder Bay. The Ontario bird Feeder Survey, conducted by the Long Point Bird Observatory in Lake Erie, has revealed that close to 50% of all Ontario bird feeders now enjoy the presence of House Finches, and that figure is rising with each passing year.

Did you have House Finches at your bird feeder this winter? Chances are good that you did. Look for a bird similar to a Purple Finch, but a bit smaller and daintier, with varying shades of rose of the chest and face, a rosy wash over the rump, sharp lines of brown streaking on the sides and belly, a notched tail and heavy bill.

Their soft expressive notes are a happy contrast to the harsh, irritating chirping of the House Sparrow, their song full-throated and as natural as the rippling of a mountain brook.

If you are planning on attracting House Finches, ensuring a good supply of black sunflower seed is a good start. They seem to prefer this over the larger, striped sunflower seed. Its small size, thin shell, and high oil content make it a great winter food. Niger seed, imported from Africa and Asia, and sold commercially at most feed mills which specialize in mixed bird feed, is another choice. Offering this in a silo type feeder specially designed for niger seed will guarantee results. Offer these two foods and an abundance of water during the summer months and you can be certain of one or two pairs of House Finches remaining to nest in some obscure corner of your premises.

Will the House Finch one day push the aggressive House Sparrow into oblivion? The House Sparrow in Prince Edward County has been undergoing a long period of decline ever since the automobile replaced the horse. When we add such factors as disease, predation and changing agricultural practices, it is easy to see that the House Finch is just one more adverse factor. With

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