

An article in the March/April 2013 edition of Bird's Watcher's Digest begins: "This year will go down in history!" The article explains that this winter, several species of birds from the extreme northern parts of Canada that typically only migrate down to southern Canada have instead flown several states south into the United States in search of food. This winter of 2012-2013 is quite unusual and it is evident in Perkins County!

A specific example of 'not often seen here' birds are four species of finches from Canada. These 'northern' finches are: pine siskins, redpolls, crossbills, and two grosbeaks. These songbirds can stand the cold of northern Canada but they head south or 'irrupt' in winters when food is scarce.



The larger-billed grosbeaks and crossbills generally eat seeds in cones of spruce and pines. The small-billed siskins and redpolls eat catkins/seeds of birch and alder trees. The extensive drought this past year resulted in low seed production by the northern trees so the northern finches headed south in search of food.

Of the four 'Northern Finches': some pine siskins are seen by birdwatchers in Perkins County more winters than not. Crossbills and the winter grosbeaks are special finds here maybe two times a decade.

It is a rare occasion when redpolls are spotted as far south as Perkins County, Nebraska.

Redpolls have gray and white striped backs, a white belly and a bright red forehead. The males also have a brush of rosy pink on the upper breast. Redpolls are a tiny five inches, (about the same size as the commonly seen yellow and black American Goldfinch).

Near Venango in western Perkins County, Dennis and Anita Watkins, Dayton and Judy Reichman, and Gary and Linda Newth have seen redpolls this winter in their farmyards. Our area does not grow birch or alder trees, of course; but the redpolls found two local sources of small seeds that substituted for their food. Small black-seed "oil" sunflowers were grown in farm fields in the Venango area last summer. The redpolls feasted on the spoils of these oil seeds and also on nyjer seeds from birdfeeders. The Watkins have seen Redpolls almost every day since December 1. The highest number counted at one time was 30.

Rough-legged hawks, huge 21 inch raptors from the north, are also a current 'fun find' in our area. One of these hawks has perched in trees nine miles north of Grant since January. This past month a second rough-legged hawk has joined the first. This pair has also been spotted in Grant and west of town by long-time birder Kay Cheney.

As "spring comes on" here in Perkins County this week, these special northern visitors will catch a wind out of the southeast and return to their breeding grounds in the extreme tundra of the sub-arctic of northern Canada and Alaska.