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LIVING

Winter irruptives

Whatever the mix of species, there will be interesting birds to be found

The number of many winter birds in the Kawarthas fluctuates widely from one year to the next. Many of these species are called winter irruptives, and the years in which they are particularly common are called "flight" years. Last year, of course, was a

spectacular flight year for the great gray owl. Most irruptive species breed in northern Canada and winter only intermittently south of the boreal forest.

Among passerines, the so-called perching birds, the main irruptive species are the bohemian waxwing, northern shrike, pine grosbeak, evening grosbeak, red-breasted nuthatch, pine siskin, common redpoll, purple finch, American goldfinch, red crossbill and white-winged crossbill.

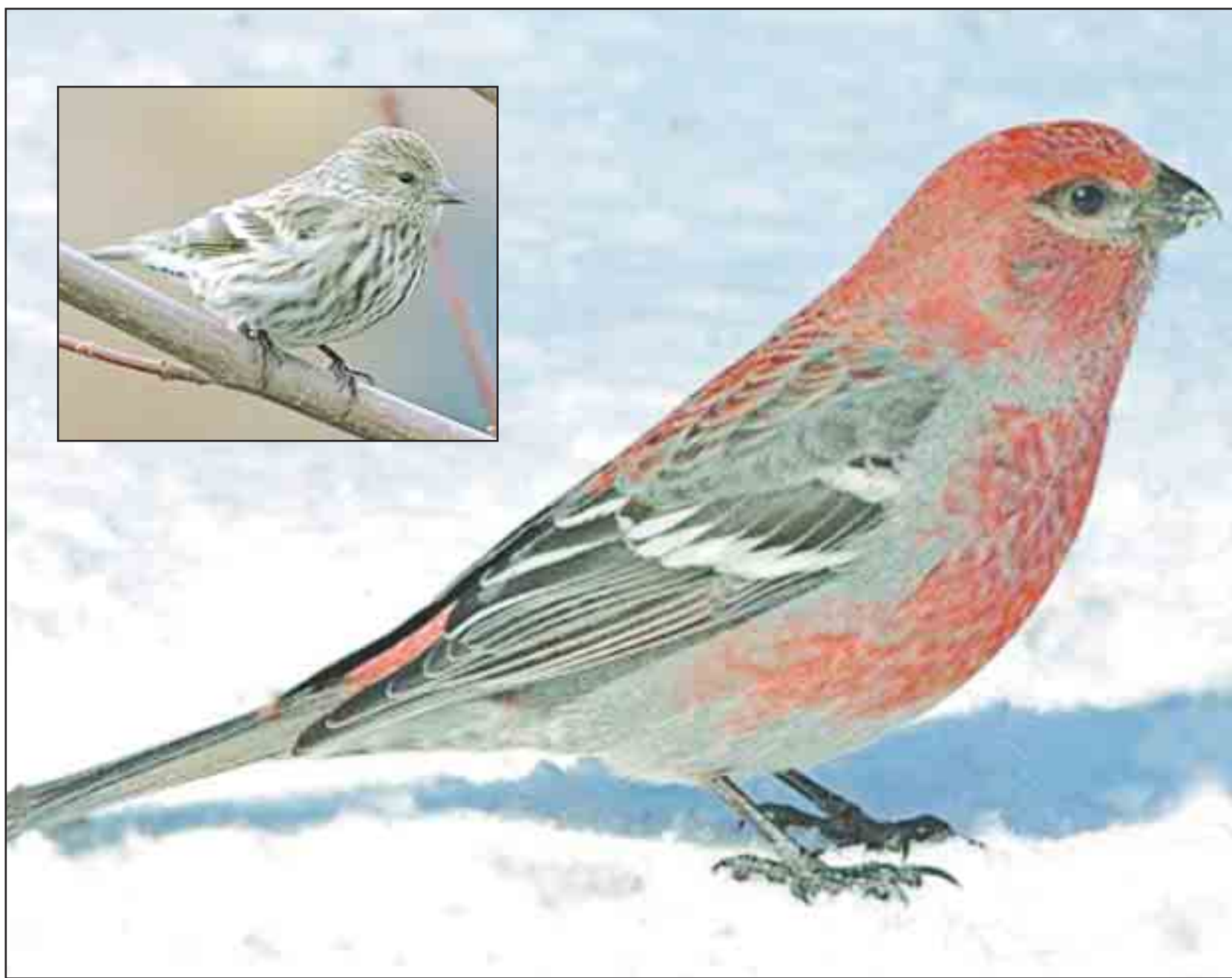
Other irruptives include the

great gray owl, northern hawk owl, snowy owl, rough-legged hawk and black-backed woodpecker.

The cause of this phenomenon is thought to be a shortage of food in the breeding range. This shortage often follows a period of "masting." Masting refers to a year in which seed production on trees is extraordinarily high. This phenomenon tends to cover a large area so that nearly all of the trees of a given species such as white pine or white spruce are masting at the same time. The abundance of food allows birds to lay more eggs than usual and to raise more young. However, in a low food year following masting, the larger than usual number of seed-eating birds must migrate elsewhere to avoid starving. Unfortunately for birders, the occurrence of masting is unpredictable and is dependent on factors that are still poorly understood.

Because they often come to feeders, finches are probably the best known bird species to descend upon our area in winter. Every year sees the arrival of a different mix of these attractive birds, depending on the availability of wild food further north. These invasions are complex, however. Finches do not all respond in the same way to the same conditions. This makes the task of forecasting which birds will grace our feeders and woodlands in a given winter difficult. Some years, species such as pine siskins will arrive in the Kawarthas in November and remain here for most of the winter. In other years, we don't see them at all, or they simply pass through. Like many finches, these flocks travel far and wide in search of food, sometimes ending up all the way down in the gulf states or in western North America.

Each fall, members of the Ontario Field Ornithologists compile information on how abundant seed crops are in northern Ontario. The information comes from Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources staff as well as birders from across the province. This year's forecast, prepared by veteran birder Ron Pittaway, calls for a moderate to good flight of most, but not all, winter finch species. Cone crops range from poor to good in the north, but few areas have excellent crops. The same is true for birch seeds, an important source of food for finches such as redpolls. Seed crops are also poor in central Ontario, including Algonquin Park, and not much better in urban and agricultural southern Ontario. Finches that do come south should therefore be readily attracted to feeders. The following are some of the highlights of the forecast.



A male pine grosbeak (main photo) and a pine siskin (inset).

Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner

Pine grosbeak: Because the American mountain-ash crop is variable to poor in northeastern Ontario this year, pine grosbeaks should be moving south. Some have already been seen in Algonquin Park. Watch for them on European mountain-ash and ornamental crab. Pine grosbeaks were very common here last winter.

Purple finch: Poor seed availability will probably mean that most purple finch will leave Ontario this fall to winter in the U.S. This species has declined by 50 per cent since 1966 for unknown reasons.

Red and white-winged crossbills: Any crossbills wandering into central and southern Ontario this winter could very well turn up at feeders — not something they usually do — because cone crops on almost all conifers are so poor. In a few areas, white pine appears to have a fairly good crop of cones and may attract red crossbills.

Common redpoll: Redpolls are especially fond of the seeds of birch trees. Because the crop this year is reported as being fairly good, most redpolls will probably stay in the north, at least until the food runs out. Some may therefore wander south in mid-winter and come to nyger feeders.

Pine siskin: The lack of conifer seeds will drive most siskins out of Ontario this winter. Some had already started to pass through the Kawarthas in late October. This should continue through much of

November. Siskins are easily attracted to nyger seed feeders.

American goldfinch: Goldfinch will most likely leave central Ontario this winter because of the lack of wild food. Many will probably remain at feeders in more southern parts of the province.

Evening grosbeak: This is another species in serious decline. Until the mid-1980s, grosbeaks were commonly seen at feeders in Peterborough. The decline may be due to far fewer outbreaks of spruce budworm, a favourite summer food. If any grosbeaks do appear this winter, they will at least find a good crop of keys on Manitoba maples in central and southern Ontario.

Blue jays: Generally poor acorn and beechnut crops will probably mean that blue jays will be far less common this winter than last. Those birds that do remain, however, will be dependent on feeders.

Bohemian waxwing: The poor American mountain-ash crop will probably mean that some of these waxwings will move south. Peterborough has traditionally been one of the best places to see this species in the province. They are attracted to European mountain-ash, European buckthorn and small crabapples.

Black-capped chickadee: Unusually large numbers of chickadees have been reported migrating south this fall. Once again, the lack of wild foods may be the rea-

son. It should be interesting to see if numbers at feeders and on Christmas bird counts are down, as well.

Whatever the particular mix of species happens to be this winter, we can rest assured that there will be interesting birds to be found.

Each year brings its own cast of unique species. Trying to guess what they might be is half the fun.

What to watch for this week

The deer hunt in the Peterborough area runs from Nov. 7 to 19. The number of tags issued will rise from 8,615 last year to 12,445 tags this year. There will also be new deer hunting opportunities later in the fall. The changes in hunting regulations are designed to control the quickly growing deer population and some of the associated problems such as deer-vehicle collisions and habitat degradation. Ontario's deer population is believed to have quadrupled over the last 20 years.

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