

Text by John F. Garrett



JFG is a Southern California teenager who has been actively birding and studying birds since the age of eight. In 2007, he was named Young Birder of the Year by the American Birding Association. Garrett continues to contribute to the ABA through publications in various media. Along with this online commentary on our cover photos of finches, Garrett is one of the contributors to the “Pyle Guide” forum in this issue of *Birding* (see p. 48). He has also produced a wonderful online summary of the recently completed ABA Young Birders’ Conference in San Diego <birding.typepad.com/youngbirders/2009/07/the-ybc-in-san-diego.html>. We are all looking forward to continued contributions from this rising star of field ornithology!

—Ted Floyd

Finches are among our most ubiquitous bird families. From backyard feeders in winter to alpine zones in the montane west, there are finches everywhere in the ABA Area. They provide varying levels of identification challenges, from picking out a Purple Finch among House Finches in Virginia, to sorting through rosy-finches at a backyard feeder in Colorado in winter, to studying and classifying the various types of Red Crossbills.



Pine Grosbeak (*Pinicola enucleator*).
Elk Mountains, Colorado; February 2009. © Jacob Spendelov.

This Pine Grosbeak is evidently a “russet” female or immature. We can say it’s an adult by the lack of molt limits and the fairly rounded outer rectrices. Knowing it was photographed in February further narrows it to an after-second-year bird. Pine Grosbeaks have six recognized subspecies in North America, which can be hard to separate where their ranges overlap. This bird is probably of the *montanus* subspecies, the most common subspecies in Colorado.



Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch (*Leucosticte tephrocotis*). Elk Mountains, Colorado; February 2009. © Jacob Spendelov.

Like the Pine Grosbeak, the Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch has six recognized subspecies in North America. These can be classified into two subspecies groups, each with three subspecies. The more westerly of these, the *littoralis* group, goes by many common names: Gray-cheeked, Coastal, Hepburn’s, etc. and contains some well-known distinct populations from western Alaska. The nominate *tephrocotis* group is usually called the “Brown-cheeked” or “Interior” subspecies group. The bird pictured here belongs to that group. Beyond that, it can be tough to nail down the correct subspecies without having the bird in the hand, although the bill alone is a key. *L. t. dawsoni*, resident in the Sierras in California, and *L. t. wallowa*, which winters mostly in Nevada, should both have smaller bills than the individual in the photo, so this bird belongs to the nominate subspecies *L. t. tephrocotis*. While on the subject of the bill, the yellow bill suggests that this photograph was taken in winter, and it was indeed taken in February.



House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*). Los Alamos County, New Mexico; November 2008. © Jacob Spendelow. This House Finch can be easily identified as an adult male by the orange-red wash in front and the broad pale

edges to the feathers on the wings. We know that this bird is from the southwest. (And note the habitat: The bird is sitting on a juniper.) Birds from that region are often more orange. Note that anywhere, though, adult male House Finches vary substantially in color. This variation is complex, with diet apparently playing an important role. Depending on various factors, the House Finches at your feeder may be a mix of standard brick-red (especially in the east), orangey (as here), yellowish, and, exceptionally, even other colors. An interesting overview of House Finch coloration is provided by Geoff Hill in his book *Red Bird in a Brown Bag* (Oxford University Press, 2002).



Lawrence's Goldfinch (*Spinus lawrencei*). Ventura County, California; June 2008. © Bob Steele.

This Lawrence's Goldfinch can also be pretty easily identified as an adult male, just by the extensive black on the face. Although it's easy to identify Lawrence's Goldfinches in this plumage in the field, it's still a good idea to take a good look at the rest of their body. Many newer birders sometimes struggle when they encounter a female or an immature because they lack the adult male's distinctive black face. On such birds, good marks to note are the yellow-edged primaries and relatively long tail; note that both characters are well-displayed by the adult male shown here. Once learned, the flight call, a rolling *declip*, is often the best clue to the bird's presence.



Pine Siskin (*Spinus pinus*). Santa Fe National Forest, New Mexico; May 2008. © Jacob Spendelow.

Determining age and sex of Pine Siskins is slightly trickier than for some of the other finches on the cover. The cover bird's overall bright, buffy coloration indicates that this individual is in fairly fresh plumage, and the lack of any molt limits tells us this bird is an adult. Although not really visible in this photo, the shape of the outer rectrices is a fairly reliable field mark that can help determine the age for many passerines, including finches: pointier rectrices in juveniles and broader and more truncate in adults. Adult male Pine Siskins have noticeably more yellow than this bird, especially below and at the base of the primaries, so the bird in the photo is a female.

In a recent move by the American Ornithologists' Union, the North American finches in the genus *Carduelis* were transferred to *Spinus*, thus giving the Pine Siskin one of the coolest scientific names of all time: *Spinus pinus*.



Common Redpoll (*Acanthis flammea*). Sax-Zim Bog, Minnesota; January 2009. © Jacob Spendelow.

Identifying redpolls can be very tricky, especially when we are dealing with a lone bird not in a flock of other redpolls. In fact, there was some dispute at first over the identification of the individual pictured here. It is rather pale, and any streaking on the undertail coverts is not particularly apparent—marks that would indicate a Hoary Redpoll. However, the bill is rather long and pointed, more like a Common. All the other characteristics of this bird seem to be consistent with the expected field marks for a Common Redpoll, as well. One hypothetical indicative field mark for separating redpolls—I've noticed this in a few photographs and specimens—is that Common Redpolls seem to have very irregularly spaced primaries, whereas in Hoary Redpolls, the primaries are a little more evenly spaced.