

## Pine Siskin *Spinus pinus*



**Folk Name:** Pine Finch, Pine Linnet

**Status:** Winter Visitor

**Abundance:** Rare to Fairly Common/Erratic (irruptive)

**Habitat:** Forests, thickets, residential areas

The Pine Siskin is an unpredictable and nomadic yellow-brown streaked finch that periodically descends from the North into the Carolinas during the winter months. Flocks of siskins may be found associating with flocks of American Goldfinches in our region, and occasionally the two species are confused. The Pine Siskin is the same size as the goldfinch, but it has distinct brown streaking and a yellow wing stripe. Its bill is narrower and more pointed. The contact call note of the Pine Siskin sounds like a wheezy *jeea* or *chia* and its flight call is a harsh, rising *zrrreee*, each of which sounds very different from the *per-chic-or-ee* call of the American Goldfinch.

Pine Siskins are our most frequent and most numerous species of irruptive “winter finch.” Their irruption pattern is considered very complex and is not well understood. It once was considered to have an “asynchronous” and “biennial” irruption pattern with birds descending south every other year into some part of the lower 48 states. However, recent studies indicate their irruptions are highly variable, more so than other finch species.

During irruption years, Pine Siskins can be present in relatively large numbers from October through April. In other years, they may be entirely absent. Our earliest arrival date on file is 6 September when Bill Hilton Jr. captured and banded a Pine Siskin in York County in 2011. Our latest departure date reported is 7 June in 2015. Steve Tracy sighted this bird at his feeder in Gaston County and reported: “I noted one Pine Siskin on one



*Pine Siskin.* (Will Stuart)



of the bird baths. I had not noted one in my yard since 5/23/2015. Later it was on the shelled sunflower seed feeder.” Flocks of more than 50–100 birds can be seen during big irruptions, and we have had one-day counts of more than 200 birds. Many visit feeders, but they also are seen feeding in sweetgum, elm, and pine trees.

Pine Siskins breed in fairly small numbers at high elevation sites in the mountains of North Carolina. Occasionally, nesting has been confirmed at lower elevation sites, and albeit very rarely, nesting has been attempted in the Piedmont. Some of these nest attempts appear to have been successful.

Leverett Loomis was the first to collect a voucher specimen of a Pine Siskin in the Central Carolinas. He noted them as “irregular” and “not very common” in Chester County during the winter in the late 1800s. Elmer Brown reported Pine Siskins being “in great numbers... even more numerous than the Goldfinches” in Salisbury during the spring of 1923. Brown watched flocks of Pine Siskins in the Town of Davidson between 16 February and 16 March in 1942, and he noted these were the first he had seen there.

Elizabeth Clarkson provided the following account of siskins in Charlotte during the winter of 1943–1944:

After seeing them all this winter, I am still wondering at the abundance of Pine siskins, flocks of them in my garden every day still. Never in all my life have I seen so many. Two mornings in succession Eddie almost stepped on one before it flew up from the same spot, so the next morning I watched the spot before we walked by and there he was again feeding on the green chickweed seeds.

Mrs. Edwin B. Nickerson of Greenville, SC, reported multiple Pine Siskins injured after flying into her picture window during the winter of 1966–1967. She made attempts to curtain off the window to prevent the reflection of the sky and later provided this account of her successful efforts to rehabilitate several of the birds:

I aided half a dozen of these little ones by cupping them in my hands and gently stroking their heads until the wild heartbeat is calmed. When they progress to resting quietly in one hand, I place the other index finger on their toes—they instinctively perch on it. If no flight effort is indicated, I drop the finger a few inches to encourage wing action to determine if there is a wing injury; it normally causes flight to a nearby limb for recuperation. One such revival led to unusual intimacy with a Pine Siskin, re-identified by a deformed foot. This bird came to my hand several times to feed, and nestled down in my palm as if memory assured safety.

Perhaps the most extraordinary accounts of Pine Siskins in this region have been related by ornithologist Bill Hilton Jr. He banded two individuals one year apart, the first in 1987 and the second in the early winter of 1988, at his Hilton Pond Center banding station in York County. Both were subsequently recaptured on the same day in May 1988 in Duluth, Minnesota—about 1,000 miles away. In 2011, Hilton banded a surprising 228 individual Pine Siskins in 2 days at his station on 10–11 January.

The North American Bird Conservation Initiative warns that the population of the Pine Siskin is declining throughout its range.