

American Goldfinch *Spinus tristis*



Folk Name: Wild Canary, Thistle Bird, Flax Bird, Potato-chip Bird

Status: Resident

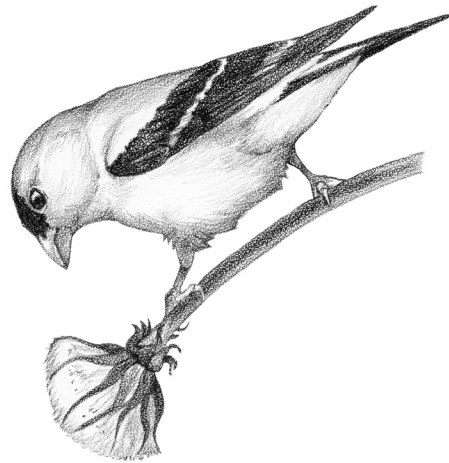
Abundance: Common during breeding and Very Common to Abundant in winter

Habitat: Overgrown fields, shrubs bordering ponds, widespread in various habitats in winter

Striking in its breeding plumage, the male American Goldfinch is prized by many homeowners as their favorite “showy” feeder bird. He is clad in a bright black and shiny yellow-gold suit with a prominent black cap and dash of white on the wings. The breeding female is less showy, but is still a lovely unstreaked yellow brown. In the winter, however, some of these same local homeowners fail to recognize these 5-inch goldfinches as they have molted into their drab brownish-yellow or grayish-yellow non-breeding plumage.

Goldfinches are almost ubiquitous permanent residents throughout the Carolina Piedmont. They are found in a variety of habitats in both urban and country settings. Winter numbers are augmented by birds moving down from breeding grounds in the north. Goldfinches banded in the Carolina Piedmont during the winter have been recaptured or found dead hundreds of miles to the north in New York and Ontario. Some of “our” breeding goldfinches may migrate further south to spend their winter.

The American Goldfinch ranks as one of the top 10 birds reported on Spring Bird Counts in this region when indexed by number observed per party-hour. Our peak one-day count in spring was 438 goldfinches tallied on



the Stanly Spring Bird Count on April 27, 1963. The American Goldfinch also ranks as one of the top 20 birds reported on our Christmas Bird Counts, and it has been reported on 100 percent of the Great Backyard Bird Counts conducted in this region. Our peak one-day count in winter was 613 goldfinches found on the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count on December 28, 1957.

The American Goldfinch is one of the last birds to nest in our region. Nesting usually occurs in July and August. There is some speculation that this may be due to the late development of their favorite food—thistle seed (*Carduus* spp.)— and the energy needs of their late spring molt. Grace Anderson reported an active nest of the American Goldfinch in Statesville on August 15, 1944, built about



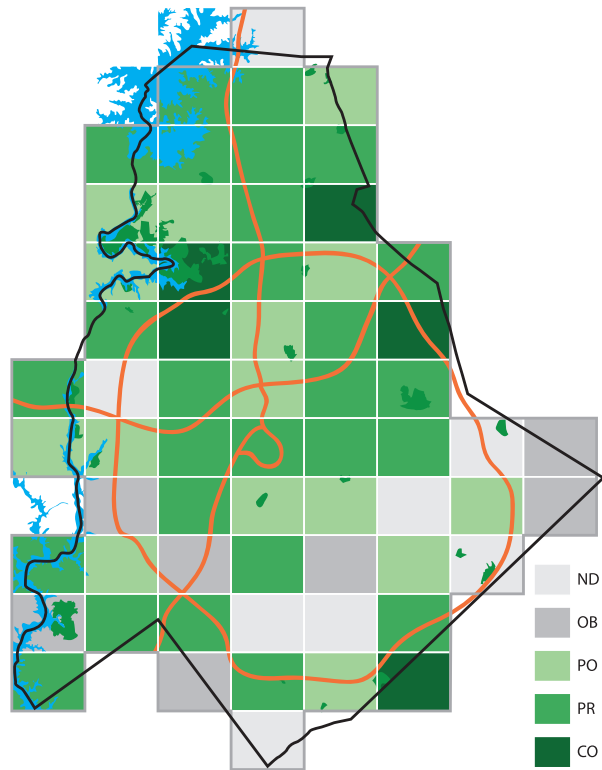
Male American Goldfinch. (Jim Guyton)



American Goldfinch. (Jeff Lemons)

12 feet off the ground in a small maple tree. It contained three eggs. Goldfinch eggs are a plain blue-white color. One nest was discovered by Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas volunteers on August 10, 2015. It also had three eggs in it. This nest was about 15 feet up in a red maple tree.

York County bird bander Bill Hilton Jr. shared two accounts of recoveries of American Goldfinches he had banded at Hilton Pond Center in York County. One bird he banded in March 2008 in full adult plumage—which takes two years to acquire—was recaptured at the same site in September 2012, making this finch at least seven years old. Another goldfinch he banded there in 2009 was found dead in August 2012 in Lyndonville, New York, almost 600 miles away. This bird later tested positive for West Nile Virus.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Widespread (PR/27, CO/5)