

House Finch *Haemorhous mexicanus*



Folk Name: Hollywood Finch

Status: Resident

Abundance: Very Common

Habitat: Urban and suburban areas, farms and brushy thickets in more rural areas

The House Finch is a relative newcomer to the Carolinas. This orange-red and brown finch is native to the western United States. During the 1930s, these western finches were illegally sold in New York City and other eastern cities as caged songbirds called “Red-headed Linnets,” “California Linnets,” or “Hollywood Finches.” The wholesale price quoted from one California shipper for eastern pet stores was \$35 per 100 birds. The Audubon Society and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service soon exposed this illegal trade, and it is believed that many pet shop owners immediately released their stock into the wild to avoid prosecution. In 1941 and 1942, House Finches were sighted on Long Island, and on May 28, 1943, the first House Finch nest was confirmed there. They became well established and soon the population spread rapidly throughout the eastern seaboard.

The first House Finch seen in North Carolina was found during the winter of 1962–1963. Eloise Potter sighted a bird on November 22, 1962, in Zebulon in Wake County and then collected one male there on February 26, 1963, thus providing the first voucher specimen for the state. The first confirmed sighting in South Carolina was a bird Mrs. W.C. Grimm found at her feeder in Greenville on December 20, 1966. This bird was later photographed by Jay Shuler on January 6, 1967.



The number of House Finches wintering in the Carolinas increased throughout the 1960s. In the Central Carolinas, a total of six were reported present in Salisbury and seven in Gastonia during the winter of 1969–1970. The official summary of Christmas Bird Counts for both states first added House Finch to the list in 1969. This species was first seen on the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count in December 1969 when a “brown-plumaged” House Finch was a regular visitor to Joe and Becky Norwoods’ backyard feeder. A House Finch showed up at the Norwoods’ home the next year on 23 November, and a female fed regularly at their feeder throughout the winter of 1971–72.

By the mid-to-late 1970s, House Finches were being



Male House Finch. (Gary P. Carter)



House Finch nest. (MCPRD staff)

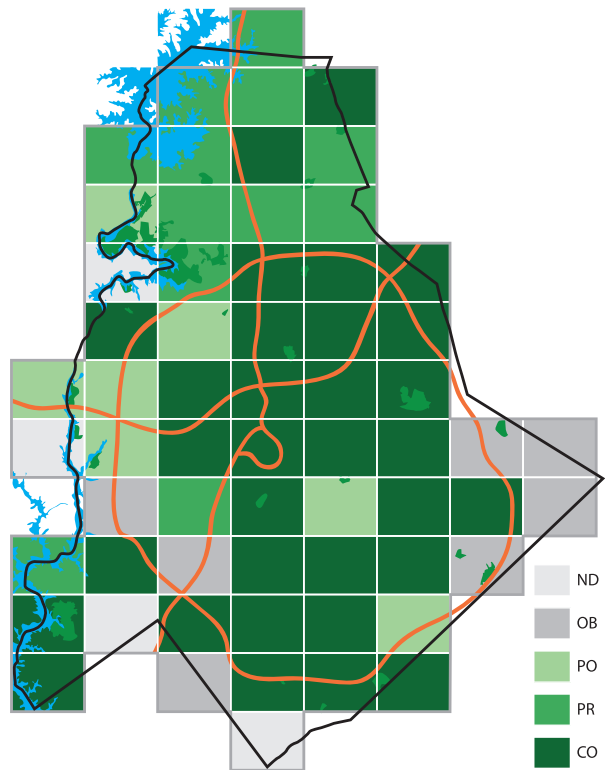
reported year-round in the Piedmont of both Carolinas. Birders began to search for evidence of nesting. On July 8, 1974, a male and female House Finch visited feeders at Charlotte's Wing Haven, but Elizabeth Clarkson could not find their nest. In May 1975, she observed two pairs of House Finches with young at her feeders at Wing Haven, thus providing the first evidence of nesting in North Carolina. Nesting was first confirmed in South Carolina by William Grimm in Greenville in June 1979. Nesting was suspected in York County as early as 1976, but a nest was not confirmed in the county until 1988.

In the 1980s, numbers of both wintering and breeding House Finches continued to increase. During the winter of 1983–1984, Bill Hilton Jr. banded 976 House Finches at his banding station in York County. By 1987, the House Finch was believed to be nesting in almost every county in North Carolina. In South Carolina, it was considered a rare breeder throughout much of the 1980s, but by 1994, its breeding range had expanded throughout the state. Today, this species is a common permanent resident throughout both states, and it is one of our most abundant feeder birds. Single day counts of several hundred birds are not uncommon.

In 1994, an outbreak of conjunctivitis (*Mycoplasma gallisepticum*), believed to have been contracted from domestic poultry, began to spread from the House Finch population in Maryland to House Finches throughout the east and later into the west. Citizen scientists helped track the spread of this disease which became known as the "House Finch eye disease." Many of these infected birds showed up at backyard bird feeders. Diseased birds were discovered in the Carolinas in 1995. This virulent disease seriously impacted the House Finch population; fortunately, the infection is not always fatal. If a diseased bird is observed at a feeder, the feeder should

be immediately removed, cleaned, and disinfected and reinstalled later to avoid further disease transmission. Thorough handwashing at all stages is essential.

Volunteers with the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas confirmed the House Finch is one of the top 20 breeding birds in the county.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Nearly Ubiquitous (PR/12, CO/32)