

## Purple Finch *Haemorhous purpureus*



**Folk Name:** Purple Linnet, Tweeker, Strawberry Bird

**Status:** Winter Visitor

**Abundance:** Uncommon/Erratic (irruptive)

**Habitat:** Mixed forests and feeders

“Watch too for the goldfinch’s cousins, the purple finches. Never mind the name, they will look like brown-striped sparrows. And they will be in the treetops eating buds. And now and then you will see among them one in glorious raspberry red. That is the adult male. But from the proportion of ‘adult males’ one would think them Mormon elders.”

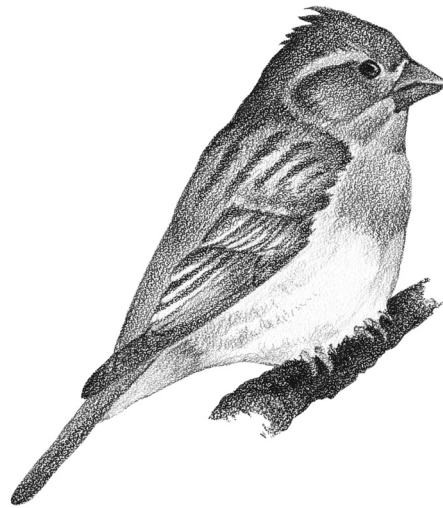
— William McIlwaine, April 8, 1928

At first glance, a novice birder may confuse the Purple Finch with the House Finch, as it is our only other regularly occurring red finch. However, upon close inspection, the raspberry-red coloring of the Purple Finch differs significantly from the orange-red coloring of the House Finch. Also, the bill of the Purple Finch is more stout and triangular. At 6 inches in length, the Purple Finch averages the same length as the House Finch, but it usually weighs more and generally appears to be a more “heavy-set” bird. The male Purple Finch never has the brown cap displayed by the male House Finch. The brown, heavily streaked female Purple Finch has a thick white eyebrow that the brown female House Finch lacks. These finches are often seen feeding on buds in the tops of tulip, elm, and maple trees.

The Purple Finch is not found in the Carolinas during breeding season. It breeds primarily in North America’s boreal forest. It is a winter resident in the Carolina Piedmont and has perhaps been best described as an



Male Purple Finch. (Gary P. Carter)



“erratic” visitor throughout the Central Carolinas. Flocks and individuals often come and go throughout the season. Most arrive in mid-October and in November, and most leave by mid-April. Our earliest arrival date on file is 18 September, and our latest date observed is 14 May. We have a single report of a Purple Finch at a feeder in Fort Mill on July 2, 2012. The report was submitted by an experienced observer, and this bird may have been sick or injured.

During the twentieth century, flocks of hundreds of Purple Finches were not unusual in the Piedmont. Even non-birders would take notice of them during irruption years. One headline in the *Statesville Record and Landmark* on April 14, 1930, noted: “Purple Finch Now Passing Through in Great Numbers.” Bill Hilton Jr. banded 685 at his York County banding station during the winter of 1986–1987. Just over 20% of these were red males, the rest were streaked brown females and immature males. A Purple Finch banded by Bill Hilton Jr. at Hilton Pond in December 2001 was found dead on a Massachusetts highway in June 2012. It was in its tenth year and only six months shy of the known longevity record for the species.

Recoveries of bands from Purple Finches banded in the Piedmont of both Carolinas indicate our winter birds breed in conifer forests hundreds of miles north. Birds banded in the winter in York County have been recovered in Maryland, Vermont, Wisconsin, Quebec, and Newfoundland. Banding data also indicate these finches exhibit strong fidelity to wintering sites in our region. Many finches banded by Bill Hilton Jr. in York County were recaptured at the same site in subsequent winters.

Today, it is believed a widespread population decline and increased numbers of feeders in northern states has impacted the number of Purple Finches found this far south during the winter. Climate change also appears to be having a major impact. In 2009, scientists announced that the average winter range of the Purple Finch has now contracted by almost 400 miles to the north.

In recent years, the number of Purple Finches appearing in this region has usually been relatively small. Periodic irruptions still occasionally produce good numbers with a few flocks of 50 or 100 or more birds being reported. Despite this decline, there are always at least a few Purple Finches reported somewhere in the region each year.