

## Red Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra*



**Folk Name:** (none)

**Status:** Winter Visitor

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

**Habitat:** Pine forests, conifers

Crossbills are rare and irregular visitors to the Carolina Piedmont. They are unique among our songbirds as no other type of songbird has their mandibles crossed at their tip. In 1949, Sprunt and Chamberlain wrote:

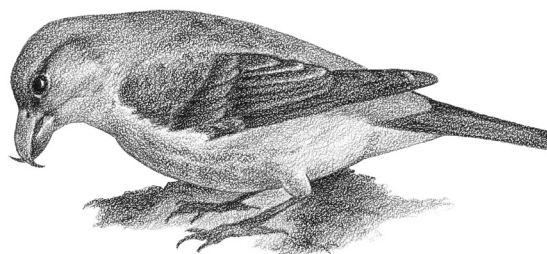
There is usually little doubt about the identity of crossbills at any reasonable range, for the characteristic which names them is an outstanding feature. The strange beak is highly adapted to the extraction of seeds of coniferous trees, upon which the bird largely subsists. [In South Carolina], Wayne mentions that he has seen them eating the seeds of the long-leaf pine, short-leaf pine, and sweet gum.

Male Red Crossbills are a dull brick red and females are dull green. Both sexes have brownish wings. At 6 ¼ inches, this crossbill is just slightly larger than our common House Finch.

The Red Crossbill has been called the “most unpredictable and mysterious bird found in our region.” Scientists have designated 10 “types” (possibly separate species) with their own distinctive flight calls. Each breeds in a separate zone of the coniferous forests that are spread throughout much of northern and western North America. The Appalachian type has been designated “Type 1” and breeds primarily in the northern Appalachian Mountains. “Type 3,” the Western Hemlock type, “Type 10,” the Sitka Spruce type, and “Type 1,” the Appalachian type, all are known to periodically “irrupt” and move southward or eastward in the winter. Research on these various “types” and their winter distribution is ongoing.

A small breeding population of Red Crossbills has been documented in scattered localities in the mountains of North Carolina since the late nineteenth century, but few nests have actually ever been confirmed. Only one nest has ever been found in South Carolina. Irvin Pitts documented this nest at Caesar’s Head on the top of South Carolina’s Blue Ridge escarpment in July 1988.

Leverett Loomis collected a male Red Crossbill in Chester County on February 17, 1887, providing the first physical evidence of this species in the Central Carolinas. This specimen was later acquired by the American Museum of Natural History. During the winter of 1908–1909, Nathan C. Brown documented an “invasion” of Red Crossbills and Pine Siskins in upstate South Carolina. He



heard crossbills every day in Kershaw County between 12 December and 4 January.

This erratic winter visitor was documented “in some force” in North Carolina during the winter of 1952–1953 at Greensboro, Winston-Salem, Charlotte, Matthews, and other locations. A summary of this crossbill “invasion” was published that year. In Charlotte:

Olin P. Wearn had a group of Red Crossbills in his yard fairly regularly from Jan. 1st to Feb. 16th. They numbered as many as 10 males and 6 females, at times. Mr. Wearn commented upon the manner in which the birds tore up the pine cones in getting at the seed. He also was attracted by an unusual turning of their heads on one side when drinking water from a bird bath that had a light film of ice on it. Also at Charlotte, Mr. and Mrs. E.O. Clarkson had a single Red Crossbill visit Wing Haven on January 25, 1953.

In Matthews:

B.R. Chamberlain watched a flock of ten or eleven Red Crossbills for several minutes, around eight o'clock on the morning of Mar. 4. Four or five of these were brilliant males. They were clinging to unopened and ice-glazed pine cones on a limb scarcely five feet over his head. They were chattering constantly with chick-like notes. They were not with other birds, and they left the area in a body.

Up to 16 total individuals were tallied.

A flock of Red Crossbills appeared again in Charlotte during the winter of 1965–1966. Mrs. Clinton McKay reported three crossbills visiting her feeders on December 23, 1965. This group remained through January 2, 1966, when she counted a total of 22 at her feeder.

A dramatic “winter finch influx” was reported in the Carolinas during the winter of 1969–1970. These birds “came by the thousands and consumed sunflower seed

by the ton” and “an unprecedented number” of Red Crossbills showed up with these northern finches. The largest single flock of crossbills was estimated at 150 and the peak one-day count total was 275 birds, both found in the mountains. Red Crossbills were seen in the Piedmont from 5 November through 20 June with peak flock sizes of 50–60 birds. In this part of the Piedmont, they were seen in Greensboro, Charlotte, Statesville, Hickory, and Salisbury. Pine seeds were repeatedly noted as their favorite choice for food. Over 6,000 finches of a variety of species were banded during this incursion including small numbers of Red Crossbills.

More than 20 Red Crossbills visited the feeders of Joe and Becky Norwood in Charlotte almost daily in December 1969. Six first arrived on 12 December, and a total of 24 were still present on 27 December, the day of the Christmas Bird Count. They were seen visiting the backyard bird bath, foraging in adjacent pine trees, and loosely associating with a flock of Pine Siskins. The earliest arrival date reported from Charlotte that winter was 10 December. The latest date crossbills were observed was April 24, 1970. The highest count recorded in Charlotte that season was 26 birds, but flocks of 120 or more were seen in the Central Carolina region. The last report from around this region during the twentieth century is a flock of eight Red Crossbills, seen by Merrill Lynch, flying over the South Mountains in Rutherford County on May 16, 1998.

There have been seven reports of Red Crossbills in the Central Carolinas since the turn of the twenty-first century. The first was a single crossbill seen at a feeder at Baker’s Mountain Park in Catawba County on December 28, 2007. A lone male crossbill was found at the same location on January 12, 2009. During the winter of 2012–2103, numbers of irruptive finches descended into the Carolinas. Dwayne Martin heard one fly over Lake Hickory in Alexander County on November 11, 2012. A week later he reported that four Red Crossbills landed in the top of a short-leaf pine tree at Riverbend Park on November 18, 2012.

Alan Kneidel and Jeff Lemons heard a pair calling in flight over David B. Waymer Park in Huntersville, NC, on December 16, 2012. They were helping out with the Southern Lake Norman Christmas Bird Count. Kneidel and Lemons estimated the pair was flying 150 feet off the ground and described their call as a “dry, strong, and frequently repeated ‘pik...pik pik pik.’ ” This sighting provided another new species for that count.

On January 19, 2013, Kevin Metcalf reported a Red Crossbill in flight over a golf course in Huntersville. He identified the bird by its flight call and noted the presence of potential food sources including: sweetgum, tuliptree, red cedar, and pines. The most recent report on file is a bird (“possibly a small flock”) Andrew Thornton turned up in Randolph County on April 2, 2013.