F O C U S

The Red Finches

Rich Stallcup

THREE SPECIES of small finches in the genus *Carpodacus* can be difficult to tell apart and in this case, males are no easier than females. As in many of these similar species groups (usually *genera*), thorough acquaintance with one or more of the members makes the whole complex more easily separable. Although all individuals of each species have certain anatomical, plumage, and pattern field marks, each also has a general look about it which is unique. Because coloration in these birds *can* vary due to diet (yellow House Finches) and *certainly* varies between geographical races, color may be overemphasized, leading one to mis-identifications. The "look" or "feeling" of each species is much more consistent.

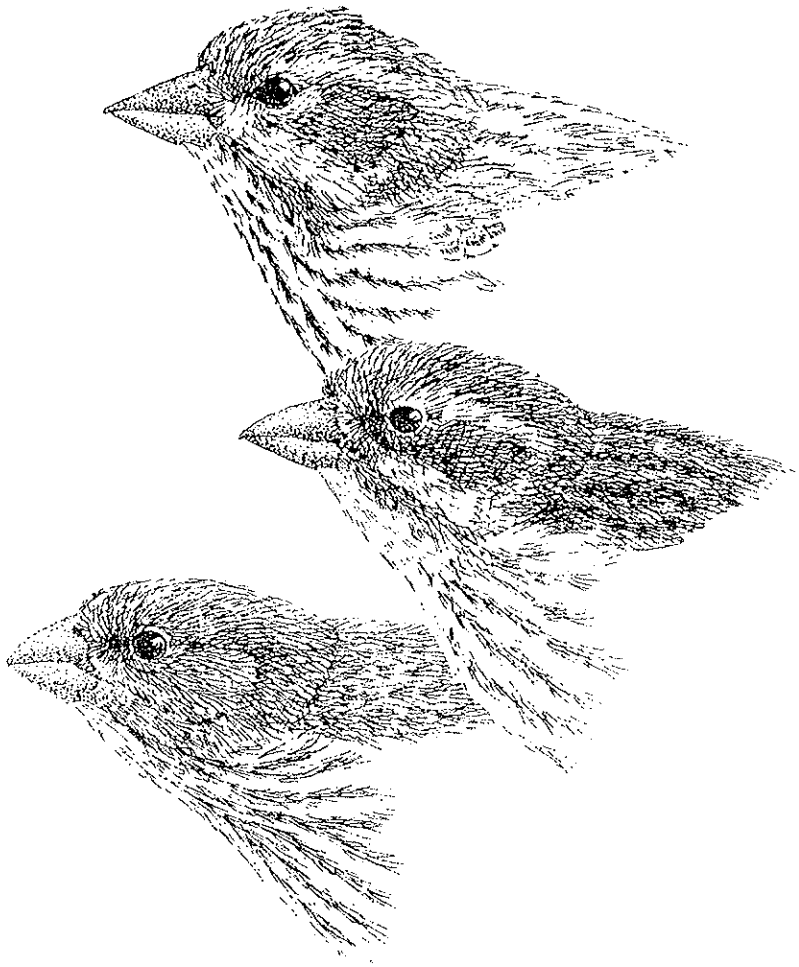
An understanding of distribution and seasonal movements is also very important. This information is easy to find in books and allows for many safe default identifications. For example, if one of these birds is encountered in May in Sacramento, it will confidently be called a House Finch. If one is found in May at Tuolumne Meadows, it may be safely called a Cassin's. One at Chinquapin in August, however, could be any of the three.

In California, House and Purple finches are widespread in winter below 4000 feet elevation west of the Sierran crest. Populations of Purples vary greatly in numbers depending upon each year's weather and food crop. Cassin's Finch, however, is considered extremely rare in these areas, remaining in the high Sierra or dropping down the eastern escarpment in winter. A good guess is that more Cassin's reach the valleys and the coast in winter than the few recent sight records indicate (there are more old specimen records than there are all sight records combined). One purpose of this note is to see, eventually, through more careful identification practices, if that hypothesis proves true.

Below are lists of characters in descending order of usefulness, the most diagnostic ones given first. No single character may be used in the field definitely to identify these birds, so look and listen carefully.

In this paper, plumage and bill shape comments refer to the California Purple Finch and the northwestern House Finch. These are the only races of those species which normally occur in California. Eastern races of Purple Finch and some southern races of House Finch are *very* different. There is only one currently recognized race for Cassin's Finch.

Note: immature male Purple and Cassin's finches take a year and half to grow in red feathers but sing, defend territories, and even breed in basic (female type) plumage. House Finches are in adult plumage upon entering their first spring.



KEITH HANSEN

ADULT FEMALE AND JUVENILE "RED" FINCHES

Top: CASSIN'S FINCH
Note sharp bill with straight culmen; discrete streaking on underparts; a vaguely "cresty" crown; general paleness of face and back, de-emphasizing facial pattern and giving a frosty look to back.

Middle: PURPLE FINCH
Note slightly decurved culmen; blurred streaking of underparts; flatter crown; general darkness of face and back, emphasizing light facial stripes; dark, obscure back stripes.

Bottom: HOUSE FINCH
Note short, thick bill with definitely decurved culmen; blurred streaking of underparts; small, rounded head with little or no facial pattern; virtually no back stripes.

3.

Cassin's Finch

(Carpodacus cassinii)

General

Bill deep at base but longer and sharper than that of House or Purple finch. Culmen (dorsal edge of upper mandible) virtually straight.

Tail relatively longer than Purple Finch, distinctly longer than undertail coverts. Relatively somewhat shorter than the tail of House Finch, and sharply notched. Closed wingtips cover one-half or more of the tail.

Underparts with narrow, discrete, clear streaks on sides with females and immatures, particularly including breast. Streaks thus appear more like those of Pine Siskin than like House or Purple finch. Throat with small arrowhead spots in rows. *The belly is always clear of markings.*

Calls in flight are tri-syllabic and may be written as "tee-d-yip" or "ti-dee-lip" with the first syllable highest-pitched. (Northern dialects are of only two syllables.) A location call usually given while perched is a very high and shrill "Psee-si-it" with the second syllable higher. This noise sounds very much like the begging call of a distant juvenile Caspian Tern.

The head almost always appears rather cresty, with crown feathers slightly elevated.

Cassin's Finches of all ages and both genders have a cold and frosty look, and well-patterned back. Overall clearly larger than Purple Finch in bulk and weight.

Females and immature males

Face pale with white eyebrow and sharp, petite malar stripe. Indefinite light post-ocular, triangular patch. Noticeable face pattern but not as contrasty as Purple Finch because of overall paleness of Cassin's.

The undertail coverts have definite, narrow streaks of brown on white (lacking or indefinite on Purple).

Back color is medium brown with white to cream colored stripes. Distinct light and dark stripes, bland and pale without olive hues.

Adult males

Cap bright, shining red, clearly defined and isolated. Face, pink and Nape, brown and white striped, sometimes frosted with pink. Rump, dull rose. Back, brown and white striped and frosty.

Breast pale rose-pink, usually unmarked.

Sides with sharp, narrow streaks or none.

Song is intermediate between those of House and Purple finches in length and the character of the melody.

Purple Finch

(Carpodacus purpureus californicus)

General

Bill, medium, between House and Cassin's. Not long and sharp, not blunt and rounded.

Tail, relatively shorter than Cassin's and much shorter than House Finch, barely longer than undertail coverts. Tail, sharply notched. Closed wingtips cover only one-quarter to one-half of the tail.

Underparts with rather broad, blurry streaks, particularly in female and immature, including breast. Streaks much like those of House Finch and not as sharp as Cassin's. Throat with blurry short streaks if any. *The belly is always clear of markings.*

Call in flight is a single, dry "pik" or "tic," usually a single note uttered at the bottom of an arc of a flight undulation. The location calls given from a perch are a slurred, whistled "chur-wee" or "cheer-lee" with the second syllable higher.

The head is long and flat with crown feathers held down. Purple Finches are, bird for bird, darker than Cassin's Finches and have warmer tones: reds for males, browns for worn females, and olive greens for immatures and fresh females. In bulk and weight they are smaller than Cassin's and larger than House Finches.

Females and immature males

Face, brown with white eyebrow and highly distinctive dark malar stripe. Clear, dark post-ocular triangle patch on face bordered by white. Bold contrasting face pattern.

The undertail coverts may have faint brownish streaks. Many are immaculate white. Cassin's are clearly streaked.

Back color, dark brown, usually with subtle olive green hues and blurry dark stripes.

Adult Males

Cap, reddish purple blending onto pinkish face and nape. Pinkest on eyebrow. Rump dull rose. Back has reddish-pink frosting over brown and tan stripes. Stripes distinct through red.

Breast, reddish purple—not as bright as in House Finch or as pale as in Cassin's.

Sides have pale, blurry streaks. Abdomen and crissum usually unmarked.

Song is a short, rising, resonant roll of notes intensifying as it goes, rather monotonous.

House Finch

(Carpodacus mexicanus frontalis)

General

Bill, short and deep, relatively blunt. Sharply decurved culmen.

Tail, relatively long, giving a much more long-tailed look to the entire bird; not as clearly or sharply notched as either of the other two species. Closed wingtips, like Purple Finch's, cover only one-quarter to one-half of tail.

Underparts with breast only lightly steaked or more usually unstreaked. Dense, gray-brown, *blurry streaks throughout sides, flanks and abdomen.* The throat is slimly streaked with tan (absent in red males).

Calls in flight as well as while perched are a rather abrupt, doubled "churp-chep" with the second syllable higher.

The head is smaller and more rounded than Purple Finch but, as in that species, the crown feathers are held down.

House Finches are dark birds, heavily striped below the breast throughout underparts. There is very little striping on the breast or back. They are smaller in bulk and weight than either of their local cousins but, because of their relatively long tails, look more gangly.

Females and immature males

Face, dark, virtually lacking of pattern (no obvious pale eyebrow or dark malar stripe). Blank expression.

The undertail coverts are faintly streaked.

Back color is a pallid gray-brown with cryptic darker stripes. It is more drab than Purple or Cassin's finch and lacking in a bold pattern.

Adult Males

Cap, red merging evenly onto face and nape, brightest on crown and eyebrow, dullest on cheeks; rarely, yellow or gold due to diet deficiency. The rump is bright red (rarely yellow) and the nape and back are as in Purple Finch but stripes of black and dark brown are indistinct. House Finch has the weakest back pattern and the strongest ventral striping.

Breast, dark red or red over brown, essentially unmarked.

Sides contain dense, dark streaks which include lower breast and belly.

Song is a long, rather monotone, bubbling phrase with a rapidly slurred ending. It has been said to resemble the cadence of someone typing rapidly, then returning the carriage at the end of a line.

House Finch is the most distinctive of the three and is the one most familiar to many of us. Learn "the look" of the House Finch on your feeder or in a roadside weed-patch and use it as a standard for judging physical characters of the other two.