

BIRDS

Status: Native Year Around Resident

AMERICAN GOLDFINCH

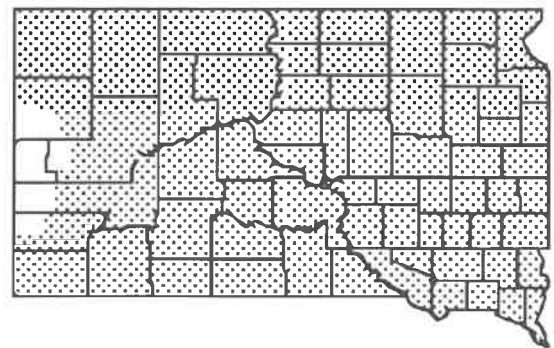
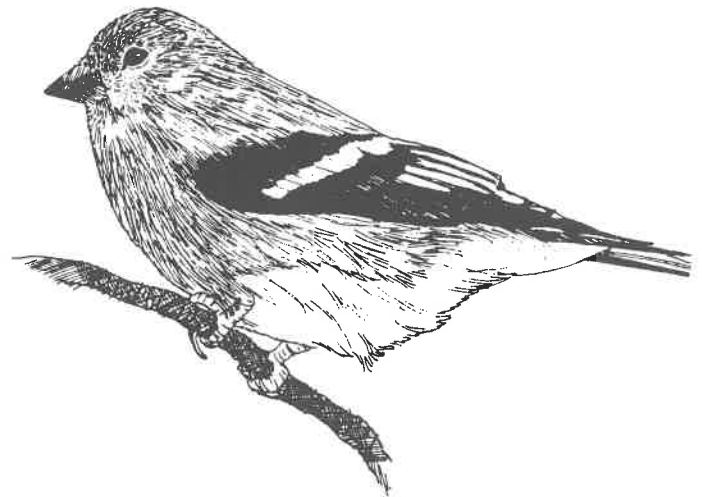
(*Carduelis tristis*)

Description

American goldfinches, also sometimes called wild canaries, are small, 5 inches (12.7 cm) in length, with stubby conical bills characteristic of seed-eating birds. The genus name is from the Latin, *carduus*, meaning thistle, referring to the birds' preference for eating thistle seed. The species name, *tristis*, is Latin for sad, alluding to the birds' plaintive call. The males in breeding plumage are easy to identify with their bright, lemon-yellow bodies, black wings and cap, and pale bill. Because of this bright coloration they are commonly called wild canaries. Unfortunately, the immatures, females, and winter males are drab and more difficult to identify. Their wings are blackish, but not the deep black of the breeding male. Their overall body color is a drab olive-yellow, and there is no black cap. The double, white *wing bars* on both sexes are conspicuous.

Distribution

American goldfinches are widespread in the eastern United States. They are common in the summer throughout South Dakota, except for the higher Black Hills. They remain in the state during the winter but go unnoticed by



novice birders because both the male and female birds are in drab plumage. In the winter, they are more numerous in the southern part of the state.

Natural History

American goldfinches are relatively late nesters in South Dakota. Nests can be found from mid-July through early September. The birds make well-built, compact nests using weeds, grass, moss, spider silk, and caterpillar webs. They line their nests with down from thistle, milkweed, and cattails. The nests are so well-built that they will hold water; a problem for exposed nests that have been reported to fill with water and cause the nestlings to drown. Goldfinches place their nests in tall plants, 2 to 3 feet (0.6 to 0.9 m) above the ground or in branches of shrubs or small trees, usually not higher than 14 feet (4.3 m) above the ground.

The female incubates the eggs while the male provides her with food. The 3 to 6 bluish-white eggs are incubated for 12 to 14 days. The parents feed the young by *regurgitating* partially digested seeds and insects into the mouths of the nestlings. The young are able to leave the nest after 2 weeks.

Goldfinches live in a variety of habitats including grasslands, brushy areas, woodland edges, shelterbelts, and residential yards, where they come to bird feeders. They are easy to attract to feeders and the males, in breeding plumage, are spectacular to see. At feeders they are particularly fond of niger thistle seed and black oil-type sunflower seeds. In the wild, they eat tree seeds from birches and conifers and weed seeds of thistle, sunflowers, ragweed, dandelion, and goldenrod. When nesting, they also eat insects, such as plant lice, grasshoppers and caterpillars.

Conservation Measures

Goldfinches are song birds, and as such, are protected by federal and state laws. It is illegal to harm the birds or disturb their nests.

Glossary

Regurgitating - the returning of partially digested food from the stomach to the mouth.

Wing bars - parallel marks visible on the upper wing of a bird.

References

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