

# Finch Forecaster

## An Interview with Ron Pittaway

*We hope OFO members will enjoy this interview with Ron Pittaway about his popular winter finch forecast. Ron is a founding life member of OFO, a past co-editor of Ontario Birds and OFO News, a past OBRC chair and secretary, and a recipient of OFO's Distinguished Ornithologist Award.*



**OFO News:** *What inspired your interest in winter finches?*

**Ron:** My interest in winter finches grew over a lifetime of birding. Their nomadic migrations intrigued me as a young birder in the 1960s growing up in Aylmer, Quebec, near Ottawa. Some winters buzzed with the calls of redpolls, siskins, crossbills, Purple Finches, Evening and Pine Grosbeaks. In other winters finches were few or absent. It was known that cone crops regulated crossbill and siskin abundance and distribution, but I knew little about finch irruptions until meeting British ornithologist Ian Newton in 1970 at Churchill, Manitoba. Newton was writing a book on finches and he mentored me by explaining fascinating ecological facts about them. Newton's book *Finches* is a classic (Collins 1972).

Ron Pittaway. Photo by Jean Iron

**OFO News:** *What other circumstances led you into finch forecasting?*

**Ron:** It was serendipity. I studied forestry so I'm both a birder and a tree watcher — prerequisites for finch forecasting. In the 1970s as a naturalist in Algonquin Provincial Park, there were many opportunities to study finches and tree seed crops. My supervisors, Ron Tozer and Dan Strickland, both shared my strong interest in winter finches. The Algonquin Christmas Bird Count regularly records Canadian and North American high counts of boreal finches such as the White-winged Crossbill. The setting was perfect.

**OFO News:** *When did you make the first winter finch forecast?*

**Ron:** Informal forecasts were made among Algonquin birding friends in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s, bird columnist Peter Whelan occasionally reported my forecasts in *The Globe and Mail* newspaper. Finch forecasting surged in popularity in 1999 when the first forecast was posted to the Ontbirds and Birdchat listservs. It was an instant success.

**OFO News:** *How do you gather information for the forecast?*

**Ron:** Finch forecasting is an example of citizen science. I get tree seed crop information from staff of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, and contacts from across Canada, New York State, New Hampshire and Alaska. I send out an email survey in mid-August asking contacts to rate tree crops as poor, fair, good, excellent or bumper. The list of trees includes spruces, pines, balsam fir, hemlock, birches and mountain-ashes. I also ask contacts if they are seeing finches. Then I map out tree seed crops and do a first draft in late August, updating it as reports come in. Normally I've heard from most sources by mid-September and post the forecast about the third week of September.

Fidgety redpolls such as this Hoary are best observed at feeders where they prefer nyger seeds.  
*Photo by Jean Iron*



The Purple Finch has a notched tail that is squared off in the similar House Finch. *Photo by Jean Iron*

The best place to see Evening Grosbeaks in winter is the feeders at the Visitor Centre in Algonquin Park.  
*Photo by Jean Iron*





Pine Grosbeak. Photo by Jean Iron



The Pine Grosbeak is my favourite finch. It is a symbol of wilderness like the loon and wolf.

**OFO NEWS:** How did you assemble such a wide network of contacts?

**Ron:** I'm fortunate in having many birding and naturalist friends. After Algonquin, I worked at the Leslie M. Frost Natural Resources Centre near Minden. There I met ministry foresters and biologists from across the province. Expert colleagues were just a phone call or email away.

**OFO News:** Why do you include three non-finch passerines in the forecast?

**Ron:** Red-breasted Nuthatch, Bohemian Waxwing and Blue Jay are included in the forecast because their movements are often linked to those of finches. For example, the Red-breasted Nuthatch is an "indicator species" of conifer seed crops. A little or no southward movement of nuthatches indicates a good cone crop in the north for finches. When nuthatches flock south in August and September, a later irruption of winter finches often follows.

**OFO News:** How popular is the forecast?

**Ron:** Birders tell me that they eagerly await each forecast hoping for an irruption year with lots of finches on Christmas Bird Counts and at their feeders. The forecast is reposted on countless internet sites such as provincial, state and local listservs, eBird, ABA Blog, QuébecOiseaux, plus numerous shares on Facebook and Twitter.

**OFO News:** What sort of feedback do you get from finch fans?

**Ron:** I normally get positive feedback. For example, Kenn and Kimberly Kaufman in 2008 wrote on their blog that "it's amazing how often Ron Pittaway is right on the mark." In non-finch winters, birders and bird seed retailers are disappointed but they don't blame me.

**OFO News:** Does the forecast have scientific value?

**Ron:** A number of university and college students have used concepts and data from the forecasts in their theses.

**OFO News:** What is your favourite winter finch?

**Ron:** The Pine Grosbeak is my favourite finch. It is a symbol of wilderness like the loon and wolf. While living in Algonquin, I cared for an injured adult male that couldn't fly. His name was Mope after its folk name in Newfoundland. Mope relished sunflower seeds and his diet was supplemented with tree buds and mountain-ash berries. He loved being outside in all seasons, but was kept inside at night. During bug season he snapped up black flies. One winter other Pine Grosbeaks were attracted by his calls and they perched on top of his enclosure. I felt sad that he couldn't fly away with them. In May and June, Mope's loud rolling song woke me up at dawn.

**OFO News:** Do you have clues about what finches might do next winter?

**Ron:** Yes, some trees such as pines and birches indicate the probable size of upcoming seed crops more than a year before they mature. However, I won't know more until trees are growing seed crops this summer. The 2016-2017 winter finch forecast will be posted in late September 2016.

Eastern Hemlock seeds are a favourite of the White-winged Crossbill.

Illustration by Ron Scovell

