

Common Redpoll

Carduelis flammea

Finches of the family *Fringillidae* are multicolored seedeaters with buoyant and undulating flight, including redpolls, siskins, goldfinches, crossbills and grosbeaks. Many species nest in the far north at high elevations. The word finch, derived from the Anglo-Saxon word "finc," is possibly an imitation of their song. The genus *Carduelis* includes redpolls, Pine Siskins and Goldfinches. All species of this genus are known to incorporate imitations of other species' calls into their songs, although redpolls do this the least. Common Redpolls are tame and gregarious finches of the subarctic. Their Latin name, *Carduelis flammea*, means "red flame-colored" and refers to their crimson "poll" or forecrown.



Fairly prevalent and social, Common Redpolls inhabit subarctic forests with catkin-bearing trees (alder and birch), brushy, weedy areas and scrub tundra. At 13cm, these redpolls are fluffy, small, and brown-streaked with tiny yellow bills. Their characteristic features include dark lores, a black throat and chin, two white wingbars and a red forecrown. The dark brown of the wings and tail along with the brown streaking of the nape, back, breast and flanks are offset by the whitish belly. Although streaked, the breast of the adult male is washed in rose. Juveniles are brown-streaked overall and lack the diagnostic red "poll" and black throat and chin of the adults.

The song of the Common Redpoll is composed of a series of short, repeated call notes and trills, "chit, chit, chit, twirrrrr, toveeoweeowee, chrrr, chit, chit, chit, chit, tivee, tivee." Frequently given during flight, their hard and bouncy call is similar to

that of the White-winged Crossbill but more rapid, "chid, chid, chid," or "jijijiji." A feeding flock gives constant but soft "tip" notes.

Common Redpolls build their cup-shaped nests among shrubs or in rock crevices. A foundation of twigs is constructed to support the woven cup of finer twigs, rootlets, mosses, grasses, and lichen. Softly lined with ptarmigan feathers, plant down and fur, the nest is a safe shelter for the 4-7, 17mm eggs of the clutch. Eggs are pale-green or bluish and spotted in purples, especially at the larger ends. Although the female alone incubates the clutch for 10-11 days, the male feeds her while she is on the nest. Young birds fledge by 12 days post-hatching and are cared for by both parents.

The diet of the Common Redpoll is primarily composed of various seeds, including those of deciduous and coniferous trees, shrubs, forbs and grasses. When abundant, insects are also consumed. During the breeding season, they forage by gleaning seeds from the ground and vegetation as they walk along the forest floor. These amazing little birds have a specialized "pocket" of the middle throat, the esophageal diverticulum, that is used like a pantry to store additional seeds. This "extra" food and their specialized winter-feeding behavior enable them to survive colder temperatures than any other songbird studied thus far! In winter, these redpolls feed mostly on birch seeds and have three distinct phases of feeding behavior. In phase one, these birds acrobatically knock the seeds from birch catkins to the ground. Next, in phase two, they gather the freed birch seeds from the snow-covered ground and store them in their esophageal diverticula. Lastly, in phase three, they fly to a sheltered, wind-protected spot to shell and consume the seeds in dense coniferous foliage. Once sheltered, these redpolls remain stationary and fluff their feathers to minimize heat loss.



Common Redpolls form large flocks and winter in North America, from southern Alaska, across most of Yukon and the Canadian provinces to Newfoundland. In summer, they range from northern Alaska, across the north central and northeastern states to Newfoundland and Greenland and many of their associated islands.