

# Crossbills Are Here!

By Romney Bathurst



The Highlands-Cashiers Plateau Audubon Society has received reports of Red Crossbills appearing at feeders in both towns recently. These birds are more often seen in winter, but are not always here as they are an “irruptive” species. That is, they follow their food source and thus their appearance in any area is unpredictable. Their crossed bills, which at first glance may look deformed, are

specially designed to pry open the closed cones of pine trees in order to get at the seed or nut within. If you have ever tried to do this yourself, you know it’s not easy! It’s true that we have plenty of pine cones in our area, but the cones must be at just the right point of maturity for the Red Crossbills to feed on them. They will, nonetheless, come to both suet and sunflower seed feeders. They are more commonly seen, if at all, during the winter months, as their stronghold in the US is in the northern pine forests, and they have been recorded on the Audubon Society’s Christmas Bird Count.

These birds normally breed where the abundance of pine cones is greatest. The newly hatched young do not have crossed bills, but these develop as the birds mature, so that they are able to forage on their own after a month or so.

While “Red Crossbill” is the species we see here from time to time, the males are usually more rusty-orange, with the females sporting a mustard yellow plumage. The birds look to be rather chunky and are larger than sparrows. There are many sub-species of the Crossbill which occur in the northern, boreal forests around the globe, and even a disjunct sub-species found in the Dominican Republic! While ornithologists are still dealing with the possibility of recognizing some of these as full species, the only other crossbill presently to be found in N. America is the White-winged Crossbill, which can be seen in Alaska.

So keep an eye out for any bird which appears to have an abnormal bill. While that may happen to any bird, in the Red Crossbill, it’s quite normal and essential to its foraging!