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# Natural History Notes

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## THE WILD CANARY



The American Goldfinch is a common bird in this area. It is also known as yellow bird, thistle bird and wild canary. The only other yellow bird with a black cap and wings is the Evening Grosbeak, which is a much larger beast. The cheery little goldfinch is the state bird of Iowa, Washington and New Jersey. The goldfinch can be found from coast to coast and from southern Canada throughout much of the U.S.

The goldfinch is a small bird approximately 4 - 5 inches long. It has relatively short legs, long pointed wings and a short forked tail. The small, conical bill is orange to orange yellow and tipped with black. During the summer the male is the more brightly colored of the two sexes. He's bright yellow with a black cap and black wings and tail with white markings. The female and juveniles are a much more modest olive-gray color with grayish-white underparts. The male molts in the fall and takes on coloration similar to the female.

The goldfinch breeds rather late in the season. In July and August when the thistles are blooming, the flocks break up and the birds pair off. The timing works quite nicely in that the birds are able to use the thistle down for nest building and the seeds ripen in time for food for the young goldfinches.

The female selects the nest site while the male flies around her singing and inspecting. There is considerable variation in the location of the site. Fields, riversides, hedges and the edge of the forest

may be chosen. The nest is usually built in one of the predominant plants in the area. The goldfinch has nested in over 80 different species of trees and shrubs. The nest is generally about 5' off the ground although it may be located as high up as 45'. The goldfinch seems to prefer nesting in the vicinity of other goldfinches and certain other species.

The nest is built in a vertical crotch of a tree or shrub and attached to one or more upright supports. The actual building of the nest takes an average of nine days. The goldfinch can accomplish the job in only 5 days later in the season. The nest is woven of plant fibers and lined with soft plant down from thistles, milkweed, willows and the like. The tightly woven walls are quite thick and will hold water. In fact, the young birds may drown if left unprotected during a storm.

Three to six pale blue eggs are laid about one week after completion of the nest. The female alone incubates the eggs for 12-14 days. The male, however, doesn't get off easy for those two weeks. He is in constant attendance on the female, guarding, singing and feeding her when she begs. The male is territorial but will defend only a small area immediately surrounding the nest.

The young will leave the nest when they can fly 50 yards, generally at about 2 weeks of age. Young goldfinches are fed a diet consisting almost entirely of seeds. The adults shuck the hard shells, swallow the kernels and regurgitate them to the youngsters. Adults feed mainly on seeds, thistle seeds being their favorite, but also eating dandelion, sunflower, aster, mullein and goldenrod seeds. Especially in spring these birds will also eat caterpillars, small grasshoppers, beetles and other insects.

Goldfinches do migrate, but when plenty of food is available, they will stay near their breeding grounds year round. Goldfinches will winter in flocks often associating with redpolls and tree sparrows.

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