# New Hampshire Bird Records



Winter 2007-08

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# **New Hampshire Bird Records**

## Volume 26, Number 4 Winter 2007-08

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**Cover Photos:** This winter's invasion of Pine Grosbeaks was impressive with greater numbers than many birders could remember. These photos reflect the varying plumages that occur. Full adult males are striking with their pink coloration. Females and immature males are nearly identical, although females are usually golden yellow while some males may have a stronger orange coloration. Photos taken by Pat Watts in Milton, NH – upper left 1/16/08, bottom 12/26/07; and Mark Suomala – right, 11/11/07 on Quincy Rd. in Rumney, NH.

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# IN MEMORY OF Margaret (Peggy) Damon (1916-2007)



he friends and family of Peggy
Damon have sponsored this issue of
New Hampshire Bird Records in
her honor. Peggy's binoculars were always
within reach and she was an enthusiastic
contributor to this publication and New
Hampshire Audubon bird conservation
projects for many years.

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#### Older Records

#### Records accepted by the Committee

Rufous Hummingbird in Salem on August 23–24, 2005. (Additional photos received.) Kentucky Warbler in Rye on September 6, 1998. (Photo. Banded.)

#### Records not accepted by the Committee

Osprey in Nottingham on December 25, 2005. Bird not described. Unlikely date. Hoary Redpoll in Loudon on February 8–9, 2004. Cannot rule out leucistic Common Redpoll. Adult male Hoary would not have heavily streaked flanks.

#### **Records Pending**

Least Bittern in Sandwich on May 24, 2007. Documentation not yet received.

### Photo Quiz - An Identification Clinic

by David Donsker. Photos by Scott Young, except for Figure 1.

We have used a slightly different format for this issue's Photo Quiz to better present the identification features of the confusingly similar redpolls. Ed.

To the delight of New Hampshire birders, the snowy winter of 2007–2008 was one that exploded with irruptive subarctic and high arctic species. Pine Grosbeaks, Bohemian Waxwings, and redpolls abounded in considerable numbers. As part of this huge influx of redpolls were a significant number of well-documented Hoary Redpoll sightings, including the individual photographed in Steve Mirick's montage of views (Figure 1) which introduces this season's "Photo Quiz."

The identification of Hoary Redpoll is one of the more difficult challenges we face as birders. There are several reasons why this is so.

First of all, in North America four taxa or phylogenic groups of redpolls are involved. Two full species of redpoll are recognized by the American Ornithologists' Union—Common and Hoary— each with two subspecies. The "Southern" or "Mealy" Common Redpoll, *Carduelis flammea flammea*, breeds in the subarctic boreal forest of Canada and Alaska. It is the most abundant redpoll seen in New Hampshire in any winter. The rarer "Greater" Common Redpoll, *C. f. rostrata*, is a larger, darker form that breeds on Baffin Island and in Greenland. It is typically seen only in major irruptive years. Hoary Redpoll breeds on the arctic tundra. Its two subspecies include the more frequently encountered "Southern" Hoary Redpoll, *C. hornemanni exilipes*, which breeds in northern Canada and Alaska, and "Hornemann's" Hoary Redpoll, *C. h. hornemanni*, the rare, large pale form that breeds in the Canadian High Arctic and Greenland.

Secondly, there are plumage differences between males and females of all forms and between juvenile (first year) and adult birds of both sexes. Thus, any given redpoll flock could have as many as sixteen different plumage classes to contend with: adult males, adult females, juvenile males, and juvenile females of four different sub-



Figure 1. Hoary Redpoll montage by Stephen R. Mirick, 2/10/08, Deerfield, NH.

species. As a general rule, adult males are palest within any given taxon and only males show any pink or red on the breast. Females are more heavily streaked than males and most juveniles are darker and even more heavily streaked than adult females, with juvenile females the darkest and most heavily streaked of all.

Finally, and most frustratingly, there is an incredible variability within sexes and age classes of both species from darker, more heavily streaked forms to paler, less streaked forms. This variability is so great that experts have suggested it eclipses any subtler differences between age/sex classes and frequently between the two species. In fact, David Sibley has recently asserted that ageing a redpoll is not helpful to its identification as younger birds also show a continuum from dark to paler forms. Female redpolls of all forms are particularly vexing and are often impossible to classify. With the exception of many adult males and some adult females, birds of intermediate or indeterminate plumage are to be expected in all redpoll flocks, and the brutal truth is that we just cannot assign many individuals to a given species.

Having said all of this, it is not impossible to identify redpolls to species and even subspecies level. In fact, it is a particularly satisfying challenge to try to do so, and there are fairly reliable ways to accomplish this for many individuals. To do so, however, requires ideal field conditions. Reasonably close, repeated looks are very helpful and, if possible, digital photographs of an individual in different poses and varying light conditions can be a great asset.

#### **Undertail Coverts and Rump**

The key features to look for when examining redpolls are the subtle differences in plumage and structure that can separate species. The two most reliable characteristics that can separate the two species are the degree of streaking on the undertail coverts and the degree of streaking on the rump. Unfortunately, these are often the most difficult areas to see well. Undertail coverts can only be seen well from below or at eyelevel at a feeder, so their appearance cannot be used as a field mark if the bird is foraging on the ground. Similarly, because the rump is often obscured by the folded wings it is often hard to observe. Also, the rump cannot be reliably evaluated when the bird is fluffed up and it can occasionally be confused with the lower flanks when the latter are also fluffed. If seen well, the undertail coverts of Common Redpolls should be boldly streaked in several rows. Very bright adult male Common Redpolls may have only one medium-width streak, but these birds can almost always be distinguished by their intense reddish pink coloration (Figures 5 and 6). In contrast, adult males and some adult female Hoary Redpolls of both subspecies have either unstreaked undertail coverts or only a single, fine, hairline median streak (Figures 1, 2, and 3).

The rumps of most Common Redpolls are extensively streaked (Fig. 7). Bright adult males with pinkish-red rumps can have almost unstreaked rumps, but the brightness of the rump distinguishes the species. Be aware that some Common Redpolls can have partially unstreaked rumps, so it's important to see the entire rump before concluding that it is unstreaked. Adult male and some adult female Hoary Redpolls (exilipes) have unstreaked white to pale pink rumps and *hornemanni* adults of both sexes have large, unstreaked white or faintly pink rumps (Fig. 3). Many female Hoary Redpolls and all juvenile Hoary Redpolls have variably streaked rumps and so overlap with Common Redpoll in that feature.

#### **Flanks**

The next most reliable feature that distinguishes the two species is the degree of flank streaking. Because the undertail coverts and rump are often obscured, the best way to scan a flock for Hoary Redpoll is to look for a pale bird with reduced flank streaking. Common Redpoll typically has thick, brown streaks on its flanks (Figures 6 and 8). In contrast, Hoary Redpoll has narrower, wispy flank streaks, especially towards the rear. (Figures 1 and 2). The rear flanks are often unstreaked. In some adult males, especially those of the subspecies *hornemanni*, the flanks are virtually unstreaked. The degrees of streaking on the undertail coverts, rump and flanks of any individual bird are usually linked, so any bird showing reduced flank streaking bears very close scrutiny. Sibley (2008) has created a diagram based on the work of Troy that attempts to score the degree of streaking in these three regions. He gives a grade of 1 to 6 for each feature depending on the intensity of the streaking with the heaviest streaking earning the lowest grade. The lowest score would be 3 (grade 1+1+1=3), the



**Figure 2.** Hoary Redpoll, *C. hornemanni*. Note: Small bill; high forehead with "pushed-in" face; small "poll;" wispy rear flank streaks; single faint streak on undertail coverts; pale scapulars.



**Figure 3.** Hoary Redpoll, *C. horne-manni*. Note: Small bill; "pushed-in" face; small "poll;" unstreaked rump and unstreaked undertail coverts; fairly uniform streaking on mantle.



**Figure 4.** Hoary Redpoll, *C. hornemanni* (left). Compare to Common Redpoll in foreground. Note the Hoary's: regular, uniform streaking on mantle; wide wing bar; pale rear scapulars; indistinct rear flank streak; "fluffy" leggings.

highest 18 (grade 6+6+6=18). Based on this strategy, a male redpoll scoring 14–18 would be a likely Hoary and one scoring 3–7 would reasonably be considered a Common Redpoll. Adult males scoring 8–13 would be intermediate and not assignable to species based on the score alone. Females and juveniles would only require a score of 11 or higher to be considered candidates for Hoary Redpoll and would require scores of 3–6 to be considered likely Commons. Females scoring from 7–10 are intermediate. This approach, however, requires more field application and is not to be considered a "quick fix" to instantly assign any individual redpoll to species.

#### Mantle and Scapulars

The color of the mantle or central upper back differs between the two species and is another independent variable to consider when trying to identify an individual bird. The mantle ground color of Common Redpoll is generally a warm brown or grayish-

brown. In adult male Hoary Redpoll (*exilipes*) the ground color is whitish-gray to brownish-gray and in *hornemanni* it is even paler, sometimes nearly white. As such, the mantle of adult male Hoary Redpoll looks cooler or "frostier" than that of Common Redpoll. (Female Hoarys, frequently, and juvenile Hoarys, typically, have brownish mantles that overlap that of Common Redpoll.) Another feature of *exilipes* Hoary Redpolls is pale feather edging on the rear scapulars that form a contrasting horizontal band between upper wing coverts on the folded wing and the mantle (Figures 2 and 4). If present, this is a good additional clue as to species, as the same feathers in Common Redpoll show little or no contrast with the mantle. In juvenile birds and darker adult females, the pale rear scapulars may be a good clue to a possible Hoary Redpoll. Further, Common Redpolls frequently have two parallel white stripes or "braces" down the center of the back that contrast with the other back stripes (Fig. 7). The striping on the back of Hoary Redpoll is more uniform (Figures 3 and 4).

#### Breast, Bill, and Legs

The intensity and distribution of breast color of adult males can be helpful. Common Redpolls have pinkish-red to deep red breasts, but beware of birds in fresh plumage, which may have whitish fringes to the breast feathers, giving them a paler look. In contrast, the breast color of adult male Hoary Redpoll is very pale frosty pink.

Much has been written about the size, structure and bill shape differences between the two species. These features work reasonably well when you are comparing hornemanni Hoary Redpolls and Common Redpolls, but they are much less useful in the more common situation in which you are trying to identify an exilipes Hoary Redpoll, as there is considerable overlap in these features with Common Redpoll. The classic hornemanni Hoary Redpoll is a large bird ("Greater" Common Redpoll is also large, but it is a very dark form that is unlikely to be confused with Hoary Redpoll) with a slightly longer tail than Common or exilipes Hoary Redpolls. It has a steeper forehead, flatter crown, and thicker neck than its relatives. Its largish head and bull neck give it a massive-headed appearance. Like many exilipes Hoary Redpolls, it has a shorter appearing bill than Common Redpoll. The short appearance of the bill is caused by a more triangular shape (a combination of a broader base and straighter culmen or upper edge) coupled with fluffier feathers around the base of the bill, which can obscure some of the bill. In some individuals this combination of features gives the bill a "pushed-in" look. The problem with using these structural features when trying to identify exilipes Hoary Redpoll is that exilipes is similar in size to Common Redpoll and is neither bull-necked nor massive-headed. Although some exilipes have small, triangular bills, many do not. So, while the presence of these features is an excellent indication of Hoary Redpoll, their absence does not eliminate this species by any means. The same caveats hold true for the fluffiness of the feathers at the base of the bill. (Compare Figures 2 and 3 to Figures 5 and 6).

In addition to often having fluffy feathers at the base of the bill, Hoary Redpolls may also have fluffy tarsal feathers, or "leggings." If present, these leggings are another good clue that the bird is a Hoary Redpoll (Fig. 4).

#### Wingbars and Head

Hoary Redpoll typically has a much more prominent and uniformly broader lower wing bar than Common Redpoll, and it has white edges on the inner secondaries,



**Figure 5.** Common Redpoll, *C. f. flammea.* Note: large bill; sloping forehead; large "poll;" heavily streaked undertail coverts.



**Figure 7.** Common Redpoll, *C. f. flammea*. Note: streaked rump; white "braces" on mantle; narrow wing bars; lack of pale scapulars.



**Figure 6.** Common Redpoll, *C. f. flammea*. Note: large bill; large "poll;" heavily streaked rear flanks; several strong undertail streaks.



**Figure 8.** Common Redpoll, *C. f. flammea* (left), *C. f. rostrata* (center). Note: sloping forehead; heavy flank streaks; lack of pale rear scapulars. *C. f. rostrata* is darker, more heavily streaked and 10% larger than *C. f. flammea*.

which often result in a small but bold white wing panel. Common Redpoll has narrower wing bars and a less distinct wing panel. (Compare Figures 4 and 7).

Hoary Redpolls of both types are less streaked on the nape, cheeks, and supercilium than Common Redpoll. As such, they often look pale headed. Further, the sides of the face and neck in Hoary Redpoll can be distinctly washed with pale buff. Often, but hardly consistently, the "poll" or red forecrown in Hoary Redpoll is smaller than in Common Redpoll. (Compare Figures 2 and 3 to Figures 5 and 6).

#### **Behavior**

Finally, there may be some behavioral characteristics that can clue you in to a possible Hoary Redpoll. They have been described as being more aggressive than Common Redpolls at feeding stations. When on the ground below feeders they may feed with their heads more frequently down and their tails more frequently up as they chase other birds away from the fallen seed. Hoary Redpolls may only be loosely associated with the Common Redpolls in a mixed flock. Tony Vazzano (pers. comm.) has noted that it is not uncommon for a Hoary Redpoll to be the one bird left behind when the others fly off in a mass from his feeders. Only when the flock doesn't stay close by or soon return to the feeder will it then fly off to join the rest of the flock. Once in a great while there will be a single redpoll at his feeders...and it will be a Hoary.

With patience, careful observation, and knowledge of the constellation of subtle field marks that characterize both species, many Hoary Redpolls, especially adult males and some adult females, may be reliably and certainly identified. Many other redpolls will have to be relegated to the "likely Hoary" status and many others, especially females and first year birds, will just have to be dismissed as indeterminate. But the difficulty of redpoll identification should not deter you from the challenge. Redpolls typically irrupt into New Hampshire every other winter. The next time redpolls stage another large influx, watch your feeders carefully. You may be pleasantly surprised.

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#### Acknowledgements

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#### **Abbreviations Used** BBC Brookline Bird Club Rd. Road BBS Breeding Bird Survey Rt. Route SF CA Conservation Area State Forest CC Country Club St. Pk. State Park FT Field Trip SPNHF Society for the Protection of NH Forests, Concord Lake L. LPC Loon Preservation Committee Thompson & Meserves T&M NA Natural Area (Purchase) The Nature Conservancy New Hampshire Audubon TNC NHA New Hampshire Bird Records WMA Wildlife Management Area NHBR NHRBC NH Rare Birds Committee WMNF White Mountain National National Wildlife Refuge NWR Forest NHA Wildlife Sanctuary PO Post Office WS R. River approximately

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