

In My Backyard

House Finches

Rosy Redbreast

Female and male House Finches



Illustration: Liz Clayton Fuller - lizclaytonfuller.org

One of the great things about living in Sanderson and the Big Bend is the extraordinary number of birds that migrate through the area every year. Big Bend National Park has over 450 species of birds that fly through or winter over within its boundaries, and Sanderson is part of that flyway.

One of the more common birds that lives yearround in our area is the House Finch (*Haemorhous mexicanus*), a rather drab brown bird with a brilliant fire engine red breast and color around its neck and forehead in the

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Lightly-speckled House Finch eggs in the nest

males, with brown streaks running through its lower body. As in many birds, the female is plain and streaky with no red coloration. Being a finch, they have a short, rounded and almost blunt beak adapted for cracking seeds, and have a small body. They arrive in small flocks, almost bouncing through the air in short strokes and gang up around our feeder to tank up on free food. They are a delight to watch and that rosy breast makes them much prettier than the little sparrows who also feed in our yard.

The finch group has a rather famous history. On the Galapagos Islands in the Pacific Ocean off South America in the 1830s, Charles Darwin's observation of finches helped to develop his theory of evolution and natural selection.

House Finch populations in the US are estimated between 267 million and 1.4 billion individuals, a very prolific group. They are native to the western U. S. and Mexico, but were introduced on the East Coast in 1939 in a New York City pet shop when caged birds being sold as "Hollywood Finches" failed to sell and were turned loose to fend for themselves. They adapted well to the environment and have spread across most of the eastern U. S. and southern Canada. They are somewhat rare in the Midwest. In their home range in the west they live in the dry desert, desert grassland, chaparral, oak savannah, by the side of streams, and in open conifer forests at elevations below 6000.

House Finches were introduced into the Hawaiian Islands around 1870 and had become found throughout the islands by 1901. Highly adaptable, they are very successful in most environments.

The red coloration of males is due to the foods they eat and the hue is quite varied from individual to individual, according to their diet. Some birds are orange or yellowish in coloration, rather than red, due to the lack of red pigment in their food supply. Birds in general are unable to make yellow or bright red colors on their own, but must get it from their food.



Baby House Finches

Unlike other species, House Finches feed their young exclusively on plant material. Other birds augment the nestling's diet with insects, a faster way to get protein into quickly-growing bodies. Coloration is very important to finches. The females mate with the brightest red individual they can find, so a drabber male is not going to be as successful in reproduction.

The bird call of the House Finch is quite melodious with a twittering line ending in a slur down or up at the end. They call and answer each other and a large group can get quite noisy.

According to the web site allaboutbirds.org, House Finches eat mainly plant materials, seeds, buds and fruits. In the wild they eat mustard seeds, knotweed, thistle, mulberry, poison oak, cactus, and many other plant species. In orchards, House Finches eat cherries, apricots, peaches, pears, plums, strawberries, blackberries, and figs, and can become a pest. At feeders, they will eat black oil sunflower in preference to the larger, striped sunflower seeds, millet, and milo.

For a small bird, House Finches can live quite a long time. The record is eleven years and seven months for a banded House Finch female found in New York state. That was a period between bandings, so the actual life span might be longer.

Reproduction in House Finches is quite mundane. They build a small nest of stems, leaves, rootlets, thin twigs, string, wool, and feathers, but with finer materials for the lining. The nest is 3 to 7 inches in outer width, and the inside 1 to 3 inches across and about 2 inches deep. The female lays two to six eggs which are anywhere from .6 to .8 inch in length and about .5 to .6 inch in width. They are pale blue to white and have black and/or purple specks. The nests can be found in deciduous and coniferous



Male House Finch eating red berries that give him his coloration.

trees or, in our country, on cactus or on rock ledges. They also nest in or on buildings, on vents, ledges, street lamps, ivy, and hanging planters. Sometimes House Finches will use the abandoned nests of other birds, but not often.

House Finches are very gregarious and are not found often as individuals, but usually in large flocks of several hundred birds. They generally feed on the ground or at feeders, and occasionally on fruit trees when in season. When not feeding they will perch on the highest branches or on power lines. In courtship behavior, the male will sometimes feed the female. He will first tease her by pretending to regurgitate the offered food several times before actually giving it to her.

In 1994 an epidemic of mycoplasmal conjunctivitis, a fungal infection of the eyes, swept through House Finch populations, killing many thousands of birds. Some local populations almost went extinct because of the disease. But, the House Finch's ability to adapt and resist and its huge presence in North America ensured its victory over the scourge and populations soon bounced back.

So, the next time you see a House Finch at your feeder, you will know most everything there is to know about the little fellow. He is a very successful bird in our area and most of the U. S. and a welcome visitor with his colorful appearance and his sweet song.

And what's in your backyard?