

PINE SISKIN

Carduelis pinus



In Pennsylvania, the wheezy-voiced Pine Siskin is usually considered an erratic winter visitor, but it also is an erratic, local breeder in the state. Siskins are gregarious throughout the year, often nesting in groups (Harlow 1951). They nest in Canada, the western continental United States and Alaska, the mountains of Mexico, and in the northeastern United States, including scattered locations south in the Appalachian Mountains (AOU 1983; Godfrey 1986).

A well-named bird, the Pine Siskin nests in pines and other conifers, which provide both food and cover. Siskins nest as readily in backyard ornamental conifers as they do in native stands of hemlocks, pines, spruces, and larches (Todd 1940; Harlow 1951; Palmer 1968). They conceal their nests in tree boughs, well away from the trunk, 6 to 35 feet (2 to 10 m) above ground—possibly higher in “big timber” (Todd 1940; Harrison 1975). The nest is often lined with the hair of dogs, horses, or other animals (Palmer 1968; pers. obs.). Like goldfinches, siskins are not very tidy nesters, allowing nestling feces to accumulate around the nest rim.

The Pine Siskin has a history of nesting in northern Pennsylvania, occasionally in large numbers. Apparently, siskins nested in the mountainous country of Lycoming County and on Round Island, Clinton County, in the last century (Warren 1890; Todd 1940). Several accounts exist of siskins nesting in the northwest, especially near Warren and Pymatuning Swamp (Simpson 1912; Todd 1940; Grimm 1941). Siskins also have nested in the Poconos (Poole unpub. ms.; Street 1971).

Most Pennsylvania Atlas reports of siskin nesting are from the northern and mountainous parts of the state, where the distribution is very scattered and irregular. Pine Siskins were discovered on the High Plateau (4% of blocks)

more than anywhere else but rarely even there. Volunteers found this species in only 1 percent of all state blocks and in no more than 10 percent of the blocks in any county, making it one of the state’s rarest breeders. Siskins were rare even in McKean (10%), Potter (8%), Centre (7%), and Cameron (6%) counties, where they were found most frequently. Most Special Species Reports describe siskins as nesting in conifers in backyards or plantings.

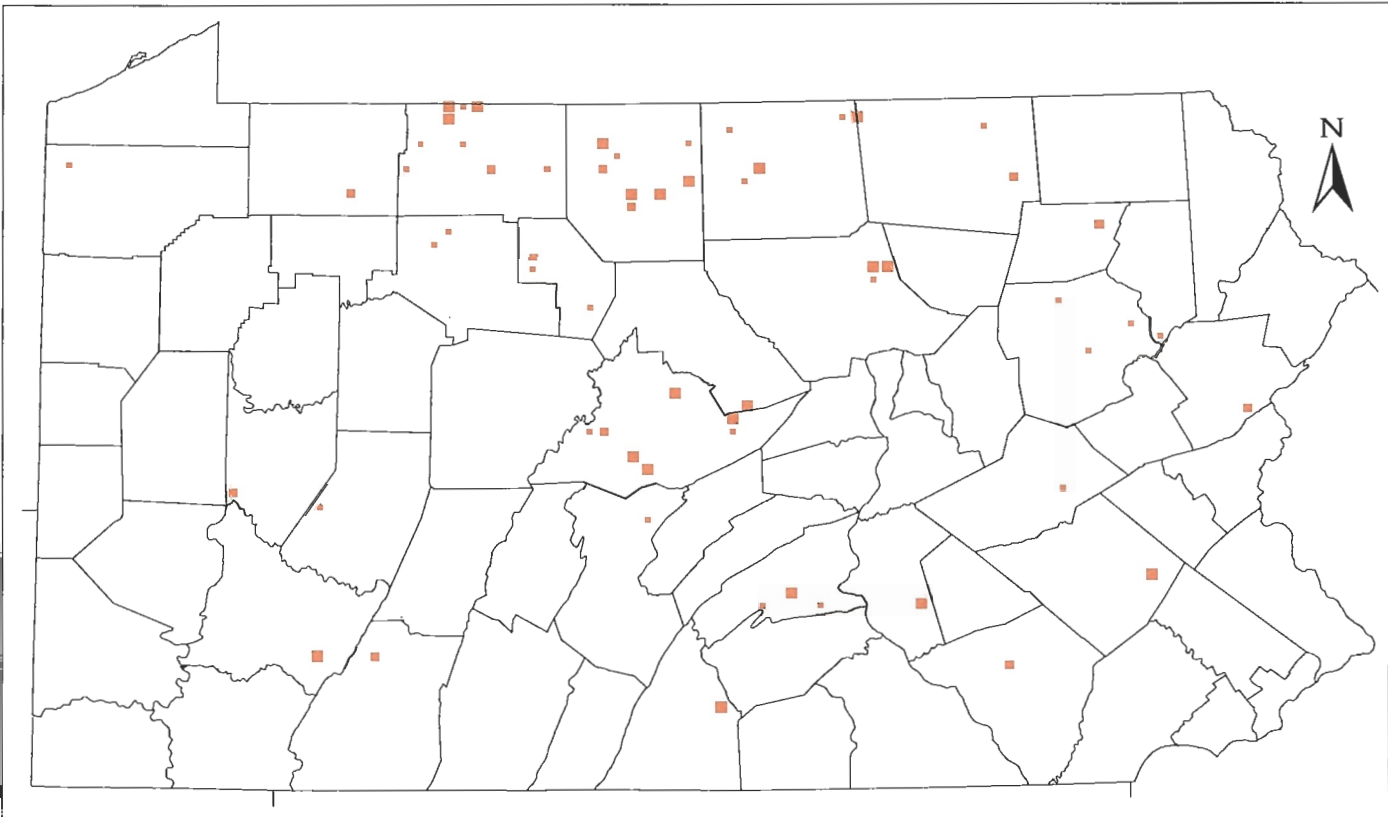
The Atlas map shows many locations where siskins apparently nested in only one year of the study period and, if the map were confined to any one survey year, this species would appear even less common. Siskins can be abundant in conifer groves, particularly hemlocks, in some years but absent the next (Todd 1940; Palmer 1968). Shifts in food supply may affect when and where siskins overwinter and later nest in Pennsylvania, but this apparently has not been studied thoroughly (Todd 1940). Seed-eating finches invade the northern United States when conifer cone crops fail in Canada, but the pattern for siskins is unclear (Bock and Lepthien 1976). The widespread offering of seeds in feeding stations further confuses the situation.

The Pine Siskin nests in early spring and was not expected to be found widely in the state. Consequently, it may have been missed in several blocks. Also, siskins sometimes nest in remote conifer groves that few birders ever visit. Many blocks were covered in only one or two years, and siskins may have nested in areas not surveyed the year of an invasion. Many nestings undoubtedly were missed during the 1988 invasion. Nesting siskins that visited feeding stations could easily have been mistaken as transients or lingering winter visitors. Such errors are not confined to the inexperienced. A charming confession of oversight comes from Sutton (1928b), who observed pairs of siskins in Pymatuning Swamp, realizing only years later that they were breeders.

Pine Siskins are very tame, so nesting is relatively easy to observe. Volunteers “confirmed” siskins in 29 percent of the blocks in which they found the species—most frequently by discovering fledged young. Special Species Reports and discussions with birders give the impression that many volunteers were conservative when they designated breeding codes for this species, if they reported breeding siskins at all.

Nesting season data for the Pine Siskin during the Atlas period were both sparse and later in the season than historical records indicate. Most authorities report siskins nesting in April and early May (Simpson 1912; Todd 1940; Poole unpub. ms.). Harlow (1951) found that siskins consistently nested near 15 April. Some reports of wandering siskins or late migrants in late May could be of family groups including freshly fledged birds (Todd 1940). Most Atlas nesting reports occurred in May and June.

PINE SISKIN				Physiographic Regions in Which Recorded		
No. of Blocks in Which Recorded	No.	% of Total	Priority Blocks	No.	% of Region	
	71	1	2	Appalachian Plateau	47	2
				Pittsburgh Plateau Section	2	<1
■ Possible	36	51	61	Blue Ridge	1	2
■ Probable	14	20	28	Central Lowland	0	0
■ Confirmed	21	29	11	Coastal Plain	0	0
				New England	1	2
				Piedmont	1	<1
				Valley and Ridge	19	1



Once locally abundant in hemlocks in some years (Simpson 1912; Todd 1940; Harlow 1951), the Pine Siskin probably suffered from the cutting of virgin conifer stands. However, even early in this century the species adapted to human disturbance by nesting in conifers planted in a variety of locations. The Pine Siskin and other conifer forest

species could profit as conifers grow back in wild areas and are planted near human habitation. The continued availability of food at artificial feeding stations may also benefit seed eaters like the Pine Siskin.

—Douglas A. Gross