Pine Siskin

Carduelis pinus

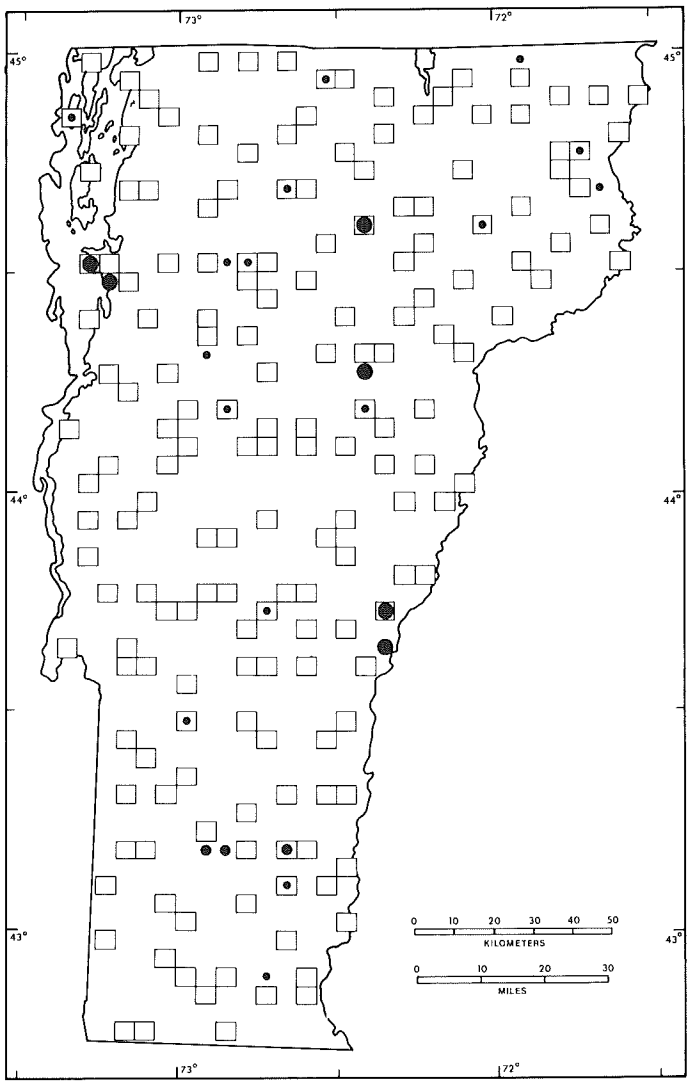
Like many of the true finches or Carduelinae, the Pine Siskin is a nomad. Its numbers vary greatly from year to year, their distribution governed by the abundance of food. Yunick (1981), citing his own banding data, presented evidence for a nearly biennial rhythm in the occurrence of invasions of this species. Yunick also noted two distinct populations during invasions, one composed of locally wintering birds and the other of migrants, especially those returning north to breeding grounds in April and May. Most Vermont nest records are for invasion years (e.g., 1925, 1981). The Pine Siskin occurs annually in Vermont, but in "off" years it is uncommon.

The Pine Siskin favors breeding habitat having two characteristics: an ample supply of food, and suitable nest sites, both of which are supplied by conifers. The presence of coniferous trees is the common denominator in Atlas Project descriptions of the Pine Siskin's habitat.

These small brown finches may travel in flocks of fewer than 20 or in huge, chattering throngs of 500 or more birds. Pine Siskins often associate with other finches. Although detection of siskins is often very easy during flight years, transients are separated from breeding birds only with difficulty. Yunick (1981) suggested that, as preparation for nesting at suitable locales, Pine Siskins travel from place to place in breeding condition. The flight and location calls, not as sweet as those of other finches, are grating and raspy. The song is an involved, warbling medley with long, buzzing trills that run up the scale.

Vermont has records of Pine Siskins for every month of the year. The largest numbers of siskins, particularly during invasions, are seen during spring and autumn, peaking from late March to mid May and from late September to early November. Pine Siskins are rarely common during summer; they are seldom seen at that time outside of the Green Mountains, the North Central region, and the Northeast Highlands. Nest building has been observed as early as April in Burlington. Dates for nests with eggs include April 18 (1981) at Burlington and mid April (1895) at East Wallingford (Kent 1916). Dates for nests with young include April 25 (1915) at Rutland (Kent 1916), May 15 (1879) at Rutland (Herrick 1884), and May 3 (1977) at Plainfield (RVB, Spring 1977). Records of dependent young include a nearly tailless juvenile at Norwich on May 3 (1980) and juveniles being fed by their parents at a Wallingford feeding station on July 12 (1974) (RVB, Summer 1974). Palmer (1968) believed that Pine Siskins are double-brooded.

The Pine Siskin's nest is a compactly built, rather flat cup of twigs, grasses, rootlets, and bark strips, lined with hair, feathers, or other soft materials. It is placed well out from the trunk on a conifer branch. Used nests are rimmed with a buildup of excreta, a typical feature of Cardueline nests. Nest heights average 4.9–6.1 m (16–20 ft) above ground, but may be placed 0.9–15.2 m (3–50 ft) up (Bent 1968); 3 Vermont nests averaged 4.9 m (16 ft) above ground. Nest trees utilized in the East include red and white cedar, white pine, Norway spruce, balsam fir, and native spruces. The eggs are bluish with brown and black spotting concentrated at the large end; the clutch



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 15 (8%)

Possible breeding:	11 (73% of total)
Probable breeding:	1 (7% of total)
Confirmed breeding:	3 (20% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	3	10	20
Green Mountains	6	11	40
North Central	2	10	13
Northeast Highlands	1	6	7
East Central	0	0	0
Taconic Mountains	1	6	7
Eastern Foothills	2	8	13

numbers from 3 to 6 eggs, usually 3 or 4 (Weaver and West 1943; Perry 1965; Bent 1968).

The Pine Siskin was located in a total of 26 blocks during the Atlas Project, including 15 priority blocks. More than half of the priority blocks in which the species was recorded were in the Green Mountains, the North Central region, and the Northeast Highlands. However, all six Atlas Project confirmations were made outside of the Green Mountains and Northeast Highlands, which were covered largely by block-busting between mid June to early July, after the presumed peak of breeding activity for Pine Siskins. The extensiveness and inaccessibility of suitable habitat for Pine Siskins made it difficult to locate the few possible breeding pairs in these regions.

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