

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

Species Notes: American Goldfinch

Every fall people ask me what happened to the Goldfinches, those dearly loved golden glows in our summer garden. Through personal observation and some research I have discovered a few interesting tidbits of information about these energetic creatures.

First of all they are quick-change artists. For most people their first encounter with this bird is as a bright golden ball of feathers roller coasting across the sky into their feeder or flower garden. These bright yellow male birds with a jet black cap and wings are hard to miss. Their name fits them perfectly.

However, in the fall when the leaves change so do the Goldfinches. In fact green or dull finch would be a more appropriate name for them. The males totally molt their gold and black feathers to become a non-descript bird (like the female is all year) most people overlook. In fact in the early years of ornithology birds that molted from their breeding plumage were often mistaken as totally different species. If they remained in their golden plumage they would stick out like sore thumbs in their drab winter environments. Easy pickin's for a Cooper's Hawk or other predators. The drab green and gray are the perfect camou-



flage. But their cheery calls and roller coaster flight still make them pretty easy to identify even if it might be hard to see them.

Male Goldfinches spend most of the spring in their dapper costume cavorting around our backyards and fields finding mates, establishing territories and jostling for position at the thistle feeders we so dutifully provide them. Then in July, when the wild thistle is in bloom, the work of raising a family begins in earnest. Once this work is done they seem to disappear. Many of the birds that breed in our area seem to beat a hasty retreat to the beach or points further south. But those that remain are joined by those who have bred further to the north.

I realized the first fall I was in my house that there was a changing of the guard by watching my thistle feeder. I noticed during the summer months birds were always jostling for feeding position at the thistle feeder. I was refilling it every other day well into the September. Then after a pretty strong front from the North moved through there was nothing. No birds at the feeder, no cheery calls in the yard, nothing. The feeder remained full and untouched and the yard was silent for a week or two.

Then another strong front came through and I again heard goldfinches in my yard. They were in my garden picking at spent flowers but none of them went to the feeder. They had no idea it was there. They were obviously a different set of birds with no previous knowledge of the feeder. They did hang around with the House Finches so I moved the thistle feeder closer to the sunflower seed feeders and slowly they realized what was in this other feeder. Finally after several weeks they too were jostling for feeding position.



About the time these birds were beginning to molt into their golden breeding plumage there was another mass exodus on a spring front. The feeder was again still for a week or so. Then another wave of gold appeared and they knew exactly where the feeder was. My summer friends were back!

It should be noted it is female who exhibits nest fidelity, often returning with new mates year after year. Although drab and often overlooked she is the reason our gardens are aglow with bright gold feathers each summer.

Most of the goldfinches you have at your feeder in the winter are probably northern visitors which have come south to stay warm and find food. How many you have will probably depend on availability of natural foods in the area. Right now I know the winter crew has arrived because I hear them in the yard but the feeder still remains calm because there is a lot of natural food in the area. Eating is their primary job in the winter. They can lose between 15 and 20 percent of their body weight overnight. So it is imperative they gorge themselves daily. Amazingly, though they look rather plump most of the time, two of them could be mailed with a single stamp back to their northern habitats!

So as you watch these cheery songsters, know that they are just sojourners that follow the call of thistle.