

TRIBAL NESTING OF THE PINE SISKIN IN PENNSYLVANIA

RICHARD C. HARLOW

My experience with the great tribal nesting of the Pine Siskin (*Spinus p. pinus*) in 1925 had its initial stimulus at Hamilton, Madison County, New York. At the time our home was located on the grounds of Colgate University, and during the first week of March we suddenly realized that there were Siskins scattered all about us, just as commonly as the Robins which so love the park-like environment of the college campus. Starting on March 12 and rapidly increasing in tempo, signs of nesting became more evident; first singing and then pursuit, billing, feeding, jousts for the favored lady, followed by nest building and copulation. It was our first experience with the tribal nesting of the Siskin, and naturally we wondered whether this might also be occurring in our beloved Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania.

We drove down to our lodge at South Sterling in Wayne County, Pennsylvania, on April 8, arriving in the late evening. At suitable places all along the Lackawanna trail down through Susquehanna, Lackawanna, Wayne and Monroe Counties, and with short trips into Pike and Wyoming, we found these erratic little finches breeding in a vast but loosely connected community. Given conifers, preferably in open, park-like groves, cemeteries, and the landscaped trees about residences, we could almost be sure that the Siskins would be present. The location was usually just such territory as the Robin loves in the mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania, and given the above type of country there were many more Siskins than Robins. We saw very few in the heavy forests though some pairs were scattered through the conifers in open woodland. The great mass chose the open, park-like, campus type of grove.

Early on the morning of April 9, when we awoke we could hear their chattering call notes and their vigorous, dashing, wheezy, canary-like songs on three sides of the lodge. It was colder here (spring was less advanced than at Hamilton), and we felt the general nesting was just about a week later. Nevertheless, from the observations of 1925 and the account of the tribal nesting of 1912 in Warren County (R. B. Simpson, *The Oologist*, vol. 29, no. 11, 1912, pp. 372-373) I believe that the dates of nesting were remarkably uniform. This is most important, in view of much that has been written about their so-called "sporadic" breeding. I even wondered if my conception of the meaning of sporadic was incorrect because the Webster of my youth had explained sporadic as "occurring separately or apart from others of the same kind; single." Many had not laid their eggs as yet, and many were just

building when we left, but the bulk nesting was one of the most uniform events I have ever witnessed, even more uniform than one finds in a really large heron or gull colony. In view of these findings, in their direct relationship to statements made in the past, data for the following nests actually found and identified are taken from my notes.

Nest 1—Cresco, Monroe County, Penna. April 9, 1925. Located a measured twenty-one feet above ground, about five feet out and well toward the extremity of a horizontal limb of a forty foot, second-growth hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*). Nest held three fresh eggs with Siskin sitting. Another Siskin, obviously its mate, was singing in flight and in the next tree. Nest still held three eggs on April 10. Siskin left nest when tree was struck, and both birds stayed very close by, both scolding and one singing. Nest built of finely broken dead hemlock twigs, some green moss, strips of shredded grape vine bark, the fibre from weed stalks and some warm wooly matter of vegetable origin; the neatly shaped cavity being well lined and felted with moss, feathers and wooly plant fibres.

Nest 2—South Sterling, Wayne County, Penna. April 12, 1925. Nest near completion. Held 2 eggs on April 15 with bird on nest. Set was incomplete and not reexamined. Nest placed well out toward extremity of, and resting on, a horizontal small hemlock limb along road and in yard of our lodge. Scattered, grove-like hemlocks. Nest approximately twenty-five feet above ground. One bird, apparently the female, did all the building of the nest during time they were observed. Another bird, presumably the male, always accompanied her, chattering and singing.

Nest 3—South Sterling, Wayne County, Penna. April 15, 1925. Nest held an incomplete set of two eggs and was not reexamined. It was about eighteen feet above ground and near the end of a horizontal hemlock limb of a forty foot tree standing in the front yard of a small hotel.

Nest 4—South Sterling, Wayne County, Penna. April 12, 1925. Nest held one egg, no bird on nest. The day was mild and warm. The pair was nearby, feeding by pushing their beaks between the scales of the hemlock cones. Nest held three eggs with one of the birds sitting on April 15, 1925. The parent sang twice while sitting upon the eggs. The nest was about thirty feet up and several feet out, resting on a horizontal limb of a Norway spruce (*Picea excelsa*) standing on the front lawn of a residence. There were scattered hemlocks also in the yard. All the above three nests at South Sterling were found within a radius of 200 yards.

Nest 5—Laanna, Pike County, Penna. April 15, 1925. Nest and one egg. Bird on nest, flushed as I approached tree, and flew about with another that came at once, one bird singing and both scolding. Nest in a Colorado blue spruce (*Picea pungens*) on the lawn of a residence. Nest was seven feet above ground, near the extremity of and resting on the main stem of a short hori-

zontal limb. The tree was approximately 12 feet high. Nest had a few horse hairs and some rabbit fur in the lining in addition to the constant materials mentioned under Nest 1.

Nest 6—Gouldsboro, Wayne County, Penna. April 15, 1925. Nest and one egg; near a residence along a road and approximately twenty feet above ground near the extremity of a horizontal limb of a scrub or yellow pine (*Pinus virginiana*) standing in open residential park-like growth of mixed conifers and hardwoods. Nest was not examined. One bird on nest; flew off and pair returned scolding. Several pairs were nearby.

Nest 7—Moscow, Lackawanna County, Penna. April 9, 1925. Nest along Lackawanna trail; saw pair on telephone wire; stopped and they went to nest after feeding for ten minutes. Nest held one egg and when examined on April 15 was destroyed. It then held broken bits of egg shells. It was situated about twenty-eight feet above ground and about three feet from the extremity of a horizontal limb of a second-growth hemlock some forty feet high.

Nests 8 and 9—South Sterling, Wayne County, Penna. April 15, 1925. Trailed birds readily to two nests in the South Sterling cemetery. Both nests had birds sitting, and in both cases the sitting bird, presumably the female, was fed on the nest by its mate. This does not necessarily mean that incubation was advanced as I have seen it done when the nests contained but one egg. One of these nests was approximately thirty-five feet up and far out on the horizontal limb of a large white pine (*Pinus strobus*) over seventy feet tall. The other nest (no. 9) was the highest nest I have ever found. It was similarly placed, but was at least forty-five feet up in the exact fork that a Blackburnian Warbler (*Dendroica fusca*) had used several years previously. These nests were far out toward the ends of slender limbs and were not examined.

In addition to the above at least ten more pairs were noted building at various points, all between the dates of April 9 and April 15. The heights of these nests that were in the process of construction were all within the range previously given, but averaged about twenty-five feet. I feel very sure that if one had tried to see how many Siskin nests could be found within ten miles of Laanna in two weeks' time, at least a hundred could have been located. Except for establishing the first records in the various counties noted above, the finding of the nests was largely incidental.

When we returned to Hamilton, New York, on the evening of April 15, the pairs on the Colgate campus were revisited to establish a relative comparison of dates with the Pennsylvania nests.

Nest H-1—April 21. Siskin sitting on one Cowbird's (*Molothrus ater*) egg

in Norway spruce in yard. Nest on horizontal limb about twenty-five feet high. On examination four days later it was deserted.

Nest H-2—April 23. Nest about thirty-five feet up and near extremity of horizontal yellow pine limb in open growth on the campus. Bird brooding three newly-hatched young and an infertile Cowbird's egg.

Nest H-3—April 28. Nest about twenty feet up near the extremity of a horizontal yellow pine limb, by the campus lake. Nest held one infertile egg. Two young Siskins were being fed by parents in the next tree.

Observation—Pair 4—April 28. Pair of birds feeding one young Siskin which was able to fly. This was on the President's lawn, Colgate University. Several facts stand out in the above nestings.

1. The situation chosen by the birds was generally very uniform. Hemlocks, spruces and pines were used with very little preference where all three grew together. The nests were placed in just such a location as is used by the Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella p. passerina*) in the Poconos, where the sparrow chooses a horizontal limb rather than an upright fork, though of course the nests were much higher than the sparrows' average.

2. Dates on early nesting birds can be very misleading inasmuch as they vary very much with the local conditions in any given locality. In nearly all instances of breeding birds which nest prior to late April in the Pennsylvania mountains, one bird constantly sits on the nest, when it is cold, from the time the first egg is laid. Both sexes share the brooding and in many instances the male feeds the female upon the nest so that the eggs never cool. Even so, many early eggs are destroyed by frost. I once climbed to four Red-shouldered Hawks' (*Buteo l. lineatus*) nests in the vicinity of Laanna, after a couple of days of severe frosts during the third week in April. Birds were nearby in all instances, and every nest held two or three frost-cracked eggs. The total of broods destroyed in this way by a late freeze, especially in the case of early tribal nestings, such as are a matter of record with the Siskin and the Cross-bills, must be tremendous.

3. The time of nesting was remarkably uniform. Most writings to the contrary notwithstanding, the average full set of eggs as of 1925 would seem to have been about April 15 in the Poconos. The time at Hamilton, New York, would seem to have been a few days earlier, but very close to the above figure.

The first nests of the Siskin to be found in Pennsylvania were discovered by the capable R. B. Simpson in Warren County, Pennsylvania, in 1912 when the first recorded tribal nesting of the species in Pennsylvania took place. Mr. Simpson found ten nests between the dates of April 14 and May 3 (*The Oologist*, vol. 29, no. 11, 1912, pp. 372-373). Now let us take the dates of the last six nests he found.

- Nest number 5—was not examined (no date given).
- Nest number 6—no eggs or young (no date given).
- Nest number 7—April 28—3 young, several days old.
- Nest number 8—April 28—2 heavily incubated eggs.
- Nest number 9—presumably April 28—3 young, just hatched.
- Nest number 10—May 3—3 or 4 young, just hatched.

When the above late dates are analyzed, it can be seen that the average of April 15 for our birds in 1925 is not far from at least 40% of Mr. Simpson's birds in Warren County back in 1912.

The nesting of these birds was repeated in Warren County in 1925. I quote from the "Birds of Western Pennsylvania" by W. E. Clyde Todd (p. 616). "In the spring of 1925, the Siskin again nested at Warren, but much earlier in the season than in 1912. Between April 1 and 6, Mr. Simpson found two nests containing young and one that held eggs far advanced in incubation. (This was during the season that the species is believed to have bred in Crawford County and the dates correspond)."

As I have endeavored to point out, local conditions of weather and temperature can and do make a difference of up to three weeks on the average nesting date of a species. Yet these three nests are the only ones out of line, and the variation is not strange for mountain birds. After all, I have known Black-throated Blue Warblers (*Dendroica c. caerulescens*), which normally have full sets on May 28, to withhold their nesting until June 15 in the Poconos during a cold and rainy spring.

Much has been written and said about the Siskin being a "sporadic" breeder. Todd (l.c., p. 615) discusses the subject at length. He states that there "are three indisputable breeding records for western Pennsylvania, based on the actual finding of nests. R. B. Simpson discovered the species nesting at Warren in 1912 and again in 1925. G. M. Sutton found a nest with young during the spring season of 1925 at Hull, Potter County, and several old nests [presumably of this species] in Pymatuning Swamp (near Hartstown) . . . It would seem, therefore, that during the season of 1925 the Siskin must have been breeding throughout our northern counties and farther south in the highlands. But it is fairly clear that the species does not breed regularly in this section . . ."

Dr. Sutton writes (l.c., p. 616) that Siskins were abundant everywhere in the hemlocks north of Hartstown from February 18 to 21, 1925, and were evidently building their nests during this period. However, I doubt if laying would have taken place as early as "the middle of March" as he states. For it seems unreasonable to believe that Siskins nested a full month earlier in western Pennsylvania than in northeastern Pennsylvania and in Madison County, New York.

For many years I spent parts of the spring months, including March and

April, in the Adirondacks where the Canada Jay (*Perisoreus c. canadensis*) was a regular breeder. I have also spent nine springs in northern New Brunswick, three in the Pembina River section of Alberta, and two in muskeg country east of Lesser Slave Lake, Alberta. During seventeen springs in regions where one might suppose the Siskin would be a regular breeder. I found only two nests (both in New Brunswick in late May) and altogether not more than six pairs of these birds. Clearly the tribal nestings were taking place elsewhere. Incidentally, there were splendid crops of cones in several of these years.

There is abundant evidence that these birds, and their relatives the Crossbills, have no definite breeding ranges. One can pick out an area where he may expect a nesting Connecticut Warbler (*Oporornis agilis*) or a Downy Woodpecker (*Limnodromus griseus*) in Alberta, or a Canada Jay in the Adirondacks, but I do not know of any locality in our northeastern and northern forests where one can say, "We will find the Pine Siskin here this year."

There is one other interesting point. One can definitely discount summer records of either Siskins or Crossbills as proving breeding, unless, for some reason, the nesting season has been prolonged. The one great jamboree over, the balance of the year is spent in wandering. Even so the Siskins complete their happy duties in the shortest possible time and are on their way. During the month of April, 1925, the Poconos were swarming with Siskins. Unfortunately, we were not there during most of May of that year, but during the last week of May only a few individuals remained and by the middle of June the last of the rear guard were but a memory.

152 W. MAIN ST., WESTMINSTER, MARYLAND