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Rosy-Finch Crest

The world's most accessible location to see all three rosy-finches is in New Mexico

by *Ken Schneider*

Many birders' life lists have no marks in the checkboxes next to the three rosy-finch species. The birds' breeding ranges are largely non-contiguous and often in hard-to-reach places. Finding all three species on their nesting grounds generally requires three separate journeys, some arduous mountain hiking, and a bit of luck.

In summer, the Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch is distributed widely, from coastal and western Alaska and British Columbia to the mountains of Idaho, western Montana, and northern California. The Black Rosy-Finch breeds high on scattered mountaintops in the Great Basin, and the Brown-capped Rosy-Finch is limited to the southern Rockies. In winter, the three species may be found together at high elevations in Colorado and New Mexico, most reliably at ski resorts such as Loveland, Colorado, and Taos, New Mexico.

When my wife Mary Lou and I moved from Texas to the mountains of central New Mexico in 1993, we had hopes of seeing our first rosy-finches. They were known to visit the nearby peaks of the Sandia Mountains, just east of Albuquerque, sporadically during the dead of winter. Several times, upon hearing reports of their presence, we dashed up into the mountains, only to be disappointed. Here, at the extreme southern edge of the wintering range of the three species, the checklists and field guides called the birds "rare and irregular," so our lack of success did not surprise us.

Our luck changed one day in early December 1999, when we responded to a Rare Bird Alert on the Internet and drove up the 13 miles of paved road to Sandia Crest, at 10,678 feet the highest point in the Sandias. The sky was blue, the air calm and crisp, and this time, the rocky area around the parking lot was animated by 40 to 50 rosy-finches of all three species. We logged our three "lifers," and at the same time, we hatched a plan.

We noticed that birds gathered along a stretch of roadway near the communication towers located just north of the Sandia Crest overlook and parking lot. A bag containing food scraps had been dropped there. Its contents, not unexpectedly, had attracted Steller's Jays and Dark-eyed Juncos. To our delight, the highly sought rosy-finches suddenly descended en masse and joined their colleagues in the feast.

We returned the next morning. Ragged wisps of fog (or were they clouds?) periodically obscured our vision, and wind-blown snow stuck to our eyeglasses as we opened the back hatch of our truck and extracted a small package of millet. Looking around to make sure we weren't being observed, we furtively scattered the seed along the edge of freshly plowed pavement, then strolled nonchalantly back to our vehicle, doing our best not to look like criminals. We waited for several minutes as the windows clouded up and wind rocked the truck. We restarted the engine and turned on the defrosters. When no creatures took the bait, we feared that we had wasted a 30-mile round trip, but our patience was rewarded

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when a few juncos and then a dozen rosy-finches flew in for a meal.

When we returned several days later, the rosy-finches were still there, enjoying the remains of our seed, but the snow was a lot deeper and much of the leftover seed had been plowed to the side of the road. Noting that the rosy-finches seemed to forage among exposed rocks and slopes, we found a wind-swept area in the upper parking lot and spread more seed. On our next visit the rosy-finches even perched on the roof and hood of our car as we watched them take the seed. We continued bringing seed up to the Crest weekly through February and never missed seeing rosy-finches.

The next December, we resumed the practice of placing millet at the wind-swept spot in the parking lot, and were pleased to find all three rosy-finch species again helping themselves. By then, word had spread that the birds were becoming more regular at Sandia Crest. While we did not confess to our plot, we posted an e-mail to the New Mexico Rare Bird Alert saying that "some kind soul" was putting seed in the lot and that the food was attracting rosy-finches. Imagine our surprise when, on our next visit, we found the parking lot strewn with mixed birdseed! From then on, we rarely had to put out any.

Our guilt increased when we saw how much seed was being wasted, ground under automobile wheels and scraped away by plows. We also became concerned about the effects of non-native seed on the fragile sub-alpine ecosystem. Worse yet, temperatures were often 20 degrees colder at the Crest than in Albuquerque. Car radiators sometimes froze, causing engines to overheat, and antifreeze drained onto the parking lot, mixing with the seeds. Were we now poisoning the birds?

No one complained to the Forest Service -- indeed, the authorities didn't seem to notice -- but we felt that we had created a big problem that cried out for solution. Could we institute a program of controlled feeding that would attract the rosy-finches yet minimize the dangers?

Seeds of Partnership

We approached the Sandia Ranger District of the U.S. Forest Service with a proposal. Since the agency requires institutional sponsorship of joint undertakings, we appealed to the Central New Mexico Audubon Society, which offered enthusiastic support. Merchants who learned of the proposal offered to provide feeders and seed. But the plan ran counter to traditional proscriptions against feeding wildlife. There were questions and concerns. Attorneys from the Audubon Society and federal officials had to review the agreement. There were liability questions: Feeders attract unwelcome mammals and their predators. (This concern becomes more pressing when Cibola National Forest's beleaguered black bears awaken in late March.) Feeders also may spread disease and despoil the land. The approval process never ran full course, but private enterprise saved the day.

Right there, next to the parking lot, was the Crest House Gift Shop and Restaurant, which was undergoing expansion. The resident manager of the Crest House had noted the number of customers who stopped by, especially during the dismal winter of 2001-2002, when a lack of snow prevented the ski area from opening for the first time in its history. Some mornings it appeared that practically all the visitors were birders -- and with good reason, since a flock of 100 rosy-finches delighted observers on January 13. So with the encouragement and approval of management, all parties decided to place the feeders on disturbed land that was under a long-term lease by the company that operated the Crest House. In February 2002 a feeder donated by the Northwest Albuquerque Wild Birds Unlimited store was finally in operation, filled with food provided by a local supplier, prdseed.com. We put up two additional feeders in October of that year. One was located on the new deck of the expanded restaurant, only 15 feet from a wall of windows in the dining area.

For the past two winters the rosy-finches have shown up in mid-November, earlier than expected. There was not a single day during the winter of 2002-2003 when rosy-finches were not reported. We went to fill the feeders two or three times a week. On each trek we always met at least one other birder. In 2003, we saw the last flock on April 8 and the last lonely Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch on April 14, the latest record date since we started feeding the birds. The last rosy-finch of 2004, a bird presumed to be a Black Rosy-Finch, was seen by several observers on March 17.

Sandia Crest is only about an hour's drive from the Albuquerque airport. Birders are now able to sit by the fire, enjoy a cup of coffee or a bowl of homemade New Mexico chili, and just wait for the rosy-finches to appear. One visitor who had been unsuccessful in earlier and more rugged pursuit of the three species was heard to exclaim, "Is this legal? Can I really count them?"

Rosy-Tourism

So many people wrote to us for information and directions to Sandia Crest that we started a website to answer their questions. We placed a rosy-finch sightings log at the Crest House. It had 361 entries between December 9, 2002, and March 14, 2004. People from 35 states, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Russia reported their sightings during that time, but the totals understate the actual number of rosy-finch watchers. Crest House employees report that birders visited almost every morning both winters, yet only one in 10 signed the book. If only half true, the number of visiting birders still numbered over two thousand! The impact of rosy-finch-related tourism on the local economy had to be significant.

All three rosy-finch species may be identified on most days. When snow cover is scant, flocks tend to be larger and the birds visit less frequently, probably because there are natural foraging opportunities all along the eight-mile spine of the Sandias. Flocks range in size from a dozen birds or so up to 150, although 35 to 50 are reported commonly. More numerous than Black or Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch, the brown-capped species comprised about half the birds counted (as many as 50 individuals were reported) until the snowy winter of 2003-2004, when Brown-caps were notably absent. As many as 40 Black Rosy-Finches and up to 25 individuals of the gray-crowned species, including up to five of the coastal ('Hepburn's') race, have been seen at one time. The Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch becomes less common in late February into March, with usually fewer than five individuals seen at a time.

Identification of all individuals in a mixed flock of rosy-finches can be difficult. Some Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches may exhibit only a slight hint of a gray hind-crown and resemble the brown-capped species. These possibly represent females and immature birds. Both Brown-capped and Black Rosy-Finches usually have relatively brighter pink on the underparts and wings than does the gray-crowned species. Contour feathers of adult Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches are usually warm cinnamon-brown, but young Gray-crowned and Black Rosy-Finches can appear dusky and quite similar, especially early in the winter. The fact that there are fewer of the "confusing" birds later in the winter suggests that many are hatch-year birds. In most, bill color changes from bright yellow to blackish toward March. (For additional information on identifying rosy-finches, see "Identification Tips" in our [February 2004 issue](#), page 72.)

We noted that when offered various mixes, rosy-finches seem to prefer sunflower seed. To help allay concerns about the introduction of alien plants, seed is limited to one type: black oil sunflower. Of course, any seed product may include a low percentage of "weed" seed, and this presents another unknown factor. After the snow melted, we studied the vegetation in the vicinity of the first feeder, recording our observations at two- to three-week intervals between May and September 2002. We found some degradation of the ground just under the feeder (a result of burrowing by a pocket gopher and, possibly, of the inhibitory effect of the sunflower hulls) but no evidence that sunflowers or other exotic plants had germinated.

Other bird species reported at the feeders are: Cassin's Finch, Dark-eyed Junco ('Gray-headed,' 'Oregon,' and 'Pink-sided'), Mountain Chickadee, Steller's Jay, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Pine Siskin, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Hairy Woodpecker, as well as a single Chukar (probably captive-reared). Red Crossbill, Clark's Nutcracker, and Pine Grosbeak were seen nearby but were not using the feeders. Birders also reported a Northern Pygmy-Owl, many Common Ravens, Red-tailed Hawks, a Cooper's Hawk, a Merlin, and several Townsend's Solitaires. Violet-green Swallows and a Say's Phoebe were present during March.

Of course, flocks of rosy-finches have patrolled the peaks of the Sandias for many years, at least since they were first reported there in the 1950s. Now, thanks to the Sandia Crest House, Central New Mexico Audubon Society, the U.S. Forest Service, and many generous

donors and volunteers, the birds concentrate at feeders. There they remind us of the healthy habitats that they and other beautiful wild creatures need to survive. (Both the Black and Brown-capped Rosy-Finch are on the Partners in Flight Watch List.) They demonstrate the economic clout of birdwatchers. And, let's not forget, they put checkmarks on life lists. As a Forest Service bird specialist put it, "Yes, the Rosies have always been here, but never has it been so easy to enjoy them!"

Ken Schneider is a retired physician and health-care quality consultant. He and his wife Mary Lou served as coordinators of the Sandia Crest rosy-finch project from its inception until earlier this year. They now live in Florida.



What to Know

How to get there: Go east from Albuquerque on Interstate 40 to Exit 175 (NM 14). Travel north on NM 14 to NM 536 (the Sandia Crest National Scenic Byway, or the "Crest Road"), about 6 miles. Go west on the Crest Road, following it past the Sandia Peak Ski Area all the way to the Crest House at the top (about 13 miles). Roads are paved and cleared promptly after snowfalls. Chains are usually not needed, but four-wheel drive is recommended when roads are snow-packed. If you arrive after a snowfall, call the Sandia Ranger District to ask about road conditions. The tram from Albuquerque goes to Sandia Peak, which is south of the Crest. Casual hikers should not attempt the mile-long trail connecting Sandia Peak and Sandia Crest, especially in winter.

Falling temperatures: The Crest Road (NM 536) rises 3,828 feet, and the temperature drops as much as 20 degrees below that of Albuquerque as you climb to the Crest. Bring an extra layer of clothing, a hat, and sunscreen. Every 1,000 feet is the equivalent of traveling 300-600 miles northward -- like driving to Hudson Bay, Canada, in half an hour!

Rising elevation: Because of the very high elevation (each breath at 10,678 feet delivers a third less oxygen than at sea level), birdwatchers flying in from near sea level will be more comfortable spending at least one night in Albuquerque or Cedar Crest at 5,000-7,000 feet before visiting the Crest. Then they should make several short trips, rather than one long trip. Even if you are in good health, you should avoid overexertion, drink plenty of fluids, and retreat to a lower elevation if you experience headache, weakness, nausea, or dizziness. If you have heart or circulatory problems, consult your physician.

Birding along the Crest Road: Mileposts line the Sandia Crest National Scenic Byway from its starting point at NM 14 to Sandia Crest. Start birding the first mile, where Northern (red-shafted) Flicker, Western Scrub-Jay, Townsend's Solitaire, Western Bluebird, Spotted and Canyon Towhees, Bushtit, Mountain Chickadee, and Juniper Titmouse may be found

in roadside pastures, dooryards, and pinyon-juniper woodland. Here are other hotspots along the Crest Road:

Doc Long Picnic Area (2.0 miles): Search the ponderosa pines surrounding the parking area for Steller's Jay, Mountain Chickadee, Pygmy, Red-breasted, and White-breasted Nuthatches, Pine Siskin, Cassin's Finch, and Red Crossbill (most winters). Sharp-shinned Hawk and (rarely) Northern Goshawk have been seen in the nearby forest. Williamson's Sapsucker may also be seen, and Red-naped Sapsucker, which nests here, may be found any time of year. Look for Northern Pygmy-Owl along the road after the 3.0-mile mark, particularly in late afternoon.

Sandia Ski Basin (8,609 feet, 7.0 miles): The Northern Pygmy-Owl likes to sit on the wires near the telephone pole at the right (north) side of the road, just past the driveway to the ski lift. Clark's Nutcrackers may congregate along the ridge to collect food scraps from skiers.

10K and Ellis trailheads (11.4 and 12.3 miles): Located above 10,000 feet in the spruce-fir belt, both trails provide open areas where rosy-finch flocks may forage. Look for them along exposed rocky slopes. Scope the vista for other winter finches and raptors. Red Crossbill, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and (rarely) Pine Grosbeak may be seen in the nearby trees.

For more information: Visit www.rosyfinch.com for answers to frequently asked questions, a mile-by-mile birder's guide to the Crest Road, links, GPS coordinates, and directions to nearby birding and dining sites. You can reach the Sandia Ranger District of Cibola National Forest at (505) 281-3304. Information is also [online](#).

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