

# White-winged Crossbill

*Loxia leucoptera*

Finches of the family *Fringillidae* are multicolored seedeaters with buoyant and undulating flight and include crossbills, redpolls, siskins, and grosbeaks. Many species nest in the far north at high elevations. The word finch, derived from the Anglo-Saxon word "*finc*," is possibly an imitation of their song. White-winged Crossbills are tame and social finches, partial to coniferous forests. As the common name implies, these birds display distinctive crossed mandibles and white wing-markings. Even the Latin name, *Loxia leucoptera*, indicates these distinctive features. While the genus name, "*Loxia*," means "slanted" and reflects the orientation of the bill, the species name refers to the wings, ("*leuco*" means "white" and "*ptera*" is the root for "wing")!

White-winged Crossbills are found in predominantly needleleaf habitats, particularly white spruce stands. All age-classes of these medium-sized (17cm) birds have black wings with conspicuous white, wing-tips, two bold, white wing-bars, bright rumps and fine streaking along the flanks. In addition, their bills are uniquely positioned such that the mandibles are obliquely offset or crossed, rather than articulated in flush alignment. Adult males are vibrant pink overall, although their plumage dulls in winter. While immature males are largely yellow, with patches of red or pink throughout, females are a duller, mottled yellowish-olive or gray. The juvenile birds are pale, buffy and heavily streaked throughout.

Often singing during undulating flight, the hard rattles and musical warbles of White-winged Crossbills are suggestive of canaries! Their song is composed of nervous mechanical trills sung at different pitches, "jrrr, jrrr, jrrr, treeeeee, kerrrr, treeeeee, krrrr." The distinctive and frequent flight-call is a 3-4 note series of hard, sharp notes similar to that of a Redpoll, "tyik-tyik-tyik." When in flocks (which is most of the time!), these crossbills produce a dry-rattling chorus.

White-winged Crossbills breed in late winter and early spring. In all seasons, they build their cup-shaped nests in lateral branches of coniferous trees far from the trunks. Constructed of mosses, grasses, lichen, forb stems, insect cocoons and bark, the nests are softly lined with fine materials. The clutch consists of 2-5, 21mm, pale bluish to greenish-white eggs, speckled in purples and browns. Only the female incubates the clutch for 12-14 days, although the male will feed her regurgitated food during this time. After fledging, young birds are reared by the mother. Just after the breeding season, these highly gregarious crossbills may form dense flocks of up to 70 birds!

Although White-winged crossbills eat the seeds of grasses, forbs and deciduous trees, as well as insects and berries, their bill structure enables them to specialize in consuming seeds of conifer cones. The uniquely crossed tips of the bill are used to pry open the cone-scales while the tongue removes the seeds. Individual birds can eat up to 3,000 conifer seeds per day! These crossbills

forage by gleaning food from foliage while young birds are fed regurgitated milky, seed pulp. These amazing birds have a specialized "pocket" of the mid-throat, the esophageal diverticulum, that is used like a pantry to store additional seeds. This "extra" food enables crossbills to survive the cold, severe weather of arctic habitats.

White-winged Crossbills inhabit the same range year-round, although in winter they wander sporadically in search of conifer-cone crops. They span across most of Alaska and Canada eastward to Newfoundland and south into the northeastern United States.