



**My first Pine Siskin of 2008
at Mt Washington in June**



**The siskin (upper left) has a thinner bill
than its goldfinch cousin**

Brunswick Wildlife Year of the Siskin Invasion

For many North and South Carolina birders, 2008 was the year of the Pine Siskin. We are still experiencing a winter irruption, or invasion as it is sometimes called, of siskins. My year began in early June at Mt Washington, NH, photographing a siskin on its breeding ground, and continued into 2009.

Siskins generally breed in northern Canada's forests and at higher elevations in the western United States. During the summer, a small number are seen in the Black Mountains of North Carolina near Balsam Gap and Mount Mitchell and there are confirmed records of them breeding there.

Pine Siskins are "winter finches" (along with crossbills, grosbeaks, and redpolls) that feed in flocks in winter and are known for their irruptions. In an irruption year, larger numbers move further south than in normal years. Siskins may be abundant in a given location some years and totally absent in others.

The general trend is for irruptions to be biennial and they appear to be related to poor seed and cone crops on their usual wintering grounds, causing siskins to show up in our forests and feeders in great numbers.

The results of the 2009 Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) are almost final. The number of participants and total birds counted increased dramatically over 2008; however, only 617 species were observed versus 635 in 2008. Statistics for this year's GBBC show the magnitude of the siskin irruption.

North Carolina Pine Siskin numbers were high as expected with 8,749 reported on 887 separate checklists compared to 2008 results of 1675 and 212 respectively. Locally, siskin observations included 27 in Southport, 6 on Oak Island, 9 at Sunset Beach, 17 in Leland, and 37 in Wilmington.

Linda Ward who lives near Coinjock in the northeastern corner of the state still has between one and two hundred coming to her feeders. Ward's maximum in 2008 was approximately 100 compared to 300 this winter.

In South Carolina, a couple of dozen are still visiting feeders at a Myrtle Beach residence and one GBBC report from Aynor, just below the state line, included 250.

In early November a small flock of about thirty landed in front of me at Alligator River NWR. Many reports of siskins had already been posted via email so I knew these guys were in the first wave of the invasion.

On January 16, I observed the first ever siskin at my feeders. By the 20th, there were as many as five, including the one in the photo. Siskins are in the same family and genus as American Goldfinches (family *Fringillidae* and genus *Carduelis*); however, their bills are sharper and thinner, adapted for eating different kinds of seed. While they will eat sunflower seeds shoulder to shoulder with goldfinches, they prefer thistle seed.

The phenomenon of flocking during the non-breeding season is well known, especially in winter. The advantages of flocking probably include the ability to better detect predators, pooling of information about food, and learning from others with more experience. Less attention required for predator vigilance, for example, means more time for foraging.

Dietary differences between summer and winter are revealed. During summer, many northern birds like siskins forage for insects and feed them to their young to supply protein for fast growth. They shift to high-energy food such as seeds and berries for the winter.

We often see mixed-species winter flocks led by chickadees...just listen for the seemingly never ending calls of chickadees to find birds in winter. Different species forage together when there is little or no competition for food. They forage on different trees, on different parts of a tree, and/or feed on different insects.

Same-species flocks are separate because they are looking for specific kinds of seed. A same-species flock of siskins may not be easy to find. They generally use their thin bills for probing under the bracts of hemlock cones for seed; however, much to our enjoyment, they come to thistle feeders.

As I am writing this, we are expecting our third snow of the winter. I have laid out an avian smorgasbord that has been well received by the growing flock of American Goldfinches...an annual occurrence in early March...and I had high hopes of a few siskins stopping by. No snow, no siskins...but a great "snow day" just the same.

John Ennis



**In early November, I watched a flock of about 30 land
at Alligator River NWR**