

TRICKY FINCHES

Learn to identify this challenging trio of red finches









THE CHALLENGE: Finches are common visitors to many yards and feeding stations, but they are notoriously difficult to identify. Three species are particularly tricky in North America: House Finch, Purple Finch, and Cassin's Finch. Adult males all show red coloration of varying shades and intensity, and females and immature males are brown and streaky. Although they may seem confusing at first glance, you can use many clues to help sort out this group. Keep in mind that Pine Siskin, female Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and other species may also resemble finches or be mistaken for finches.

KEY POINTS:

- 1. WHERE ARE YOU?**
Location is a huge clue since the three species have different ranges and habitats
- 2. SIZE AND SHAPE**
Look at the bill, head, wing length, and tail
- 3. COLOR PATTERN**
Males differ in the shade, intensity, and location of red coloration; females have different head patterns and streaking

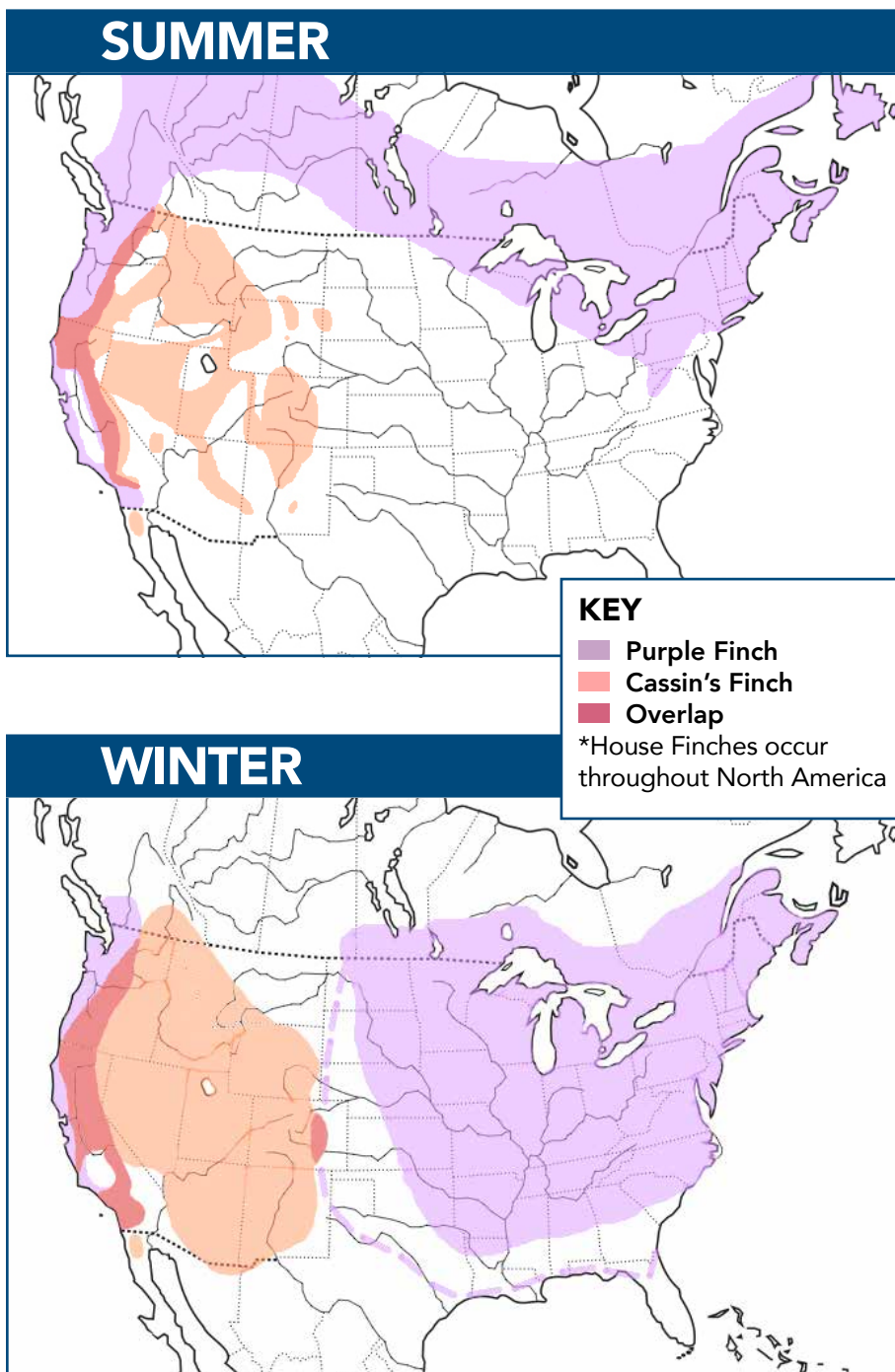
INTRODUCTION

Which finches are we talking about?

	HOUSE FINCH	PURPLE FINCH	CASSIN'S FINCH
MALES			
FEMALES			

1. WHERE ARE YOU?

Before even looking at the birds, it is important to understand range, seasonality, and habitat preferences of each species.



For dynamic range maps from eBird, click on the species' name at right or visit <http://ebird.org/ebird/map>.

House Finch

The most widespread species of the trio, and a common feeder visitor. It is found throughout the U.S., Mexico, and southern Canada. (Its broad range is not pictured in the range maps at left.) It is more often found in urban areas such as backyards and city parks than Purple or Cassin's Finch, but can also be found in more natural habitats such as open woodland, brushy field edges, and desert. It tends to avoid the high elevations often favored by Cassin's Finch.

Purple Finch

This species breeds in coniferous or mixed forests in the northeastern U.S., across southern Canada, and along the West Coast. In some years their range expands to include regions within the dashed line on the lower map. Purple Finch frequently visits feeders and backyards, but is less likely to be found in urban areas than House Finch. The population breeding along the west coast is a different subspecies, and prefers riparian areas and low-elevation oak woodland. It is not usually found breeding in high-elevation coniferous forest like Cassin's Finch.

Cassin's Finch

Lives in mountainous regions in the interior West. It is a year-round resident in part of its range, while some birds migrate south into Mexico for the winter. Cassin's Finch breeds in open coniferous forests and uses similar habitat in the winter, but may drift to lower elevations and be more likely to visit yards and bird feeders.

Please record your sightings of finches and other birds at eBird.org.

2. SIZE AND SHAPE

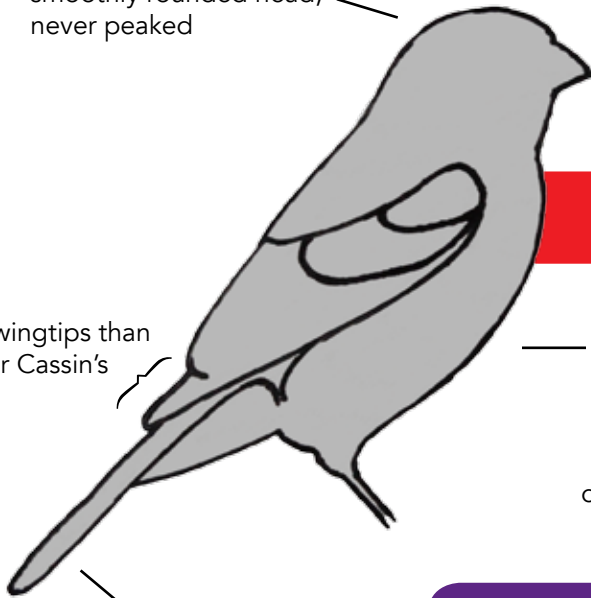
smoothly rounded head,
never peaked

short, rounded bill

◀ HOUSE FINCH

shorter wingtips than
Purple or Cassin's

overall rather long and slender



long, rounded tail
sometimes very
slightly notched

often shows puffy crown

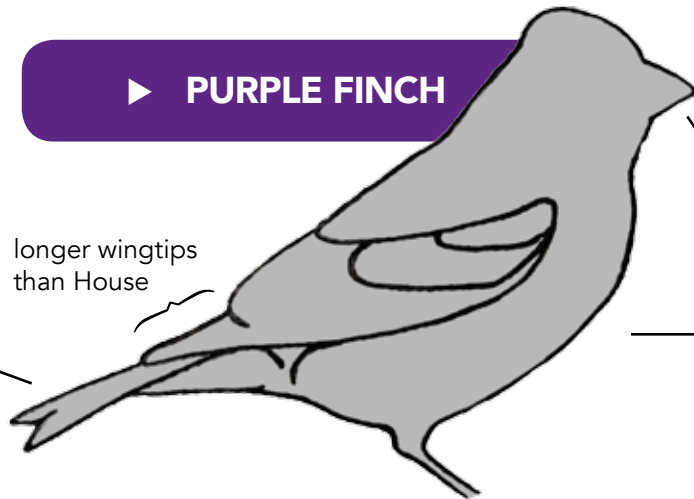
▶ PURPLE FINCH

longer wingtips
than House

notched tail

thick, slightly
curved bill

chunky body



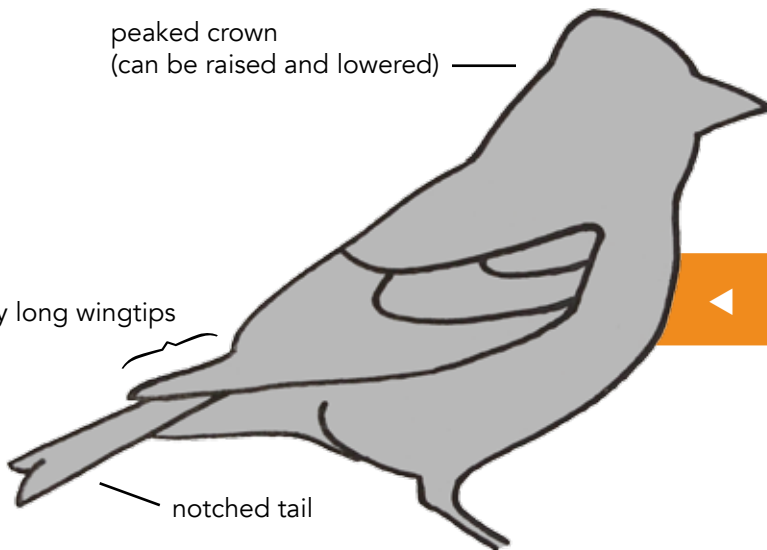
peaked crown
(can be raised and lowered)

long and usually straight bill

◀ CASSIN'S FINCH

very long wingtips

notched tail



3. COLOR AND PATTERN

MALES

HOUSE FINCH



Look for the contrast between red and brown. This photo shows how the red is concentrated on the head and breast, whereas the sides and wings lack color. Also notice the crisp streaking on the side of the body and the more curved upper mandible compared to Purple or Cassin's Finch.



This photo of a male House Finch on a feeder illustrates the more slender, long-tailed shape when compared with the other two species. Also notice where the red is concentrated: the head and upper breast, and the rump. Other parts look colder gray, with distinct streaks on the sides.

PURPLE FINCH



Here is a male Purple Finch on a feeder. The bright raspberry red color is obvious on the head and breast. There are no distinct streaks on the sides like a male House Finch would show.



Another view of a male Purple Finch, showing the overall bright coloration. The entire body looks infused with color, like it was dipped in raspberry juice.

CASSIN'S FINCH



The key on male Cassin's Finch is the very bright, contrasting crown. Look at how much darker rose-red the crown of this bird is compared with the pale pink color on the rest of the head and upper breast. Another clue is the streaked undertail coverts: on male Purple Finches, these would be clean white.



Look at how bright and contrasting the red crown is on this male Cassin's Finch. The rest of the head, throat, and upper breast is very pale pink. The white eyering is unique to Cassin's Finch, and while more helpful on females, can be obvious on males, too.

FEMALES*

HOUSE FINCH



Female House Finches give the impression of a washed out, nondescript bird. Compare the uniformly pale brown head of this bird with the contrasting dark brown-and-white markings of a female Purple Finch.



Another image of a female House Finch that shows the pale grayish-brown coloration, the absence of much pattern on the head, and diffuse or blurry streaking below. The base color of the underparts is off-white, not bright.

PURPLE FINCH



This female Purple Finch shows a typically bold face pattern, with a bright white eyebrow and malar ("mustache") stripe. Also notice the distinct triangular streaks on the underparts and the thick bill.



Another view of a female Purple Finch. Check out the bill size compared with House Finch! This individual shows a particularly broad white eyebrow and malar on the face. The base color of the underparts is bright white, unlike the off-white color on House Finch.

CASSIN'S FINCH



The head pattern on a female Cassin's Finch is more contrasting than on a House Finch. Other features include the longer bill, shorter tail, and more peaked head shape. Compared with Purple Finch, look for the streaked undertail coverts and more subdued face pattern.



This photo illustrates the streaked undertail coverts of a female Cassin's Finch. Compared with House Finch, note the extremely long wings (see how far the wingtips reach along the tail?) and bolder face pattern (but not quite as bold as Purple Finch).

*Some first-year males are indistinguishable from females in the field. However, the female-plumaged male birds often sing full songs, which females never do.

QUIZ



ABOVE: Looking at the left bird, we notice its shape: a smoothly rounded crown, short bill, relatively short wings, and tail without an obvious notch. Also look at the cold grayish color overall, and streaking on the sides. At first glance, it may appear to be a female—there’s no red present. But check out that very subtle yellow wash on the face. This is actually a variant of male House Finch that is yellow instead of red due to an insufficient amount of ingested carotenoids. This variation is common in House Finch but extremely rare in Purple or Cassin’s.

We see a helpful clue on the right-hand bird; where is the red concentrated? The breast is very pale pink, and there’s a slightly darker wash on the throat and face, but check out that crown: intense rosy-pink. This prominent pink patch on the crown is the best sign of male Cassin’s Finch. Also notice very little streaking on the sides, notched tail, and long bill (although this is difficult to judge at this angle).

AT RIGHT: We’ve got a tricky angle on these birds. The top bird is clearly a male with bright red on the breast and head. Even though we can’t see much else, notice how the red only extends to the breast, and the belly and sides are grayish-brown and streaked. These features add up to give us a male House Finch.

The lower bird does not show any red coloration, indicating it’s a female. The tail lacks a deep notch, which is a good first clue, but let’s also look at plumage. The head is plain grayish-brown with no bold patterns, and there is streaking on the sides. This is also a House Finch.



For more information visit AllAboutBirds.org.

Illustration, text, and maps: **Luke Seitz**. Photos: © **Christopher L. Wood**, except: **Ryan Schain** (House Finches p.1, left House Finch p.5), **Kelly Colgan Azar** (right Purple Finch p.4).