

Bloedel Bird of the Month – The Goldfinch

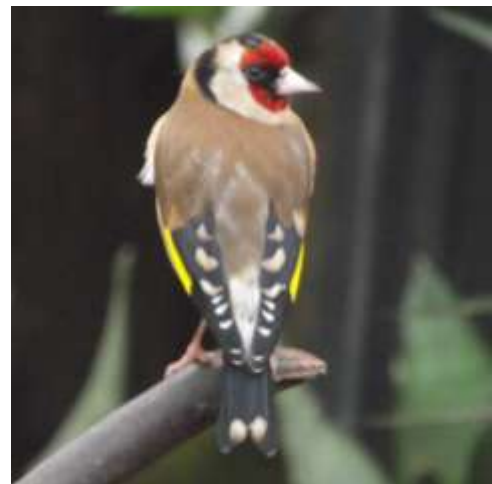


Goldfinches are colourful song birds. They come from North Africa, Europe, western and central Asia. They now breed in many countries. They might survive wild in BC. Goldfinches are useful birds. They mainly eat the small seeds of ‘weeds’ such as thistles, rather than grains. They also feed their chicks aphids and other pests. Their Latin name, *Carduelis carduelis*, comes from their diet; where ‘Carduus’ is a genus of thistles.¹

Birds breed when their food supply is best. Thistles appear late in the season; so Goldfinches breed later in the summer than most other birds.²

An invasive species is one that is non-native to a region and harms the ecosystem there.³ Unlike many disastrous introductions that ‘seemed like a good idea at the time’, the European Goldfinch is not usually considered invasive. It has not displaced other birds in Argentina and Uruguay.⁴ In Australia they are not a problem.⁵ In New Zealand, which has no native finches,⁶ they are “the most welcome small introduced bird.”⁷

The Goldfinch is 12 to 13.5 cm (4 to 5 inches) long and weighs 16 to 22 grams (0.56 to 0.78 ounces). The sexes are alike, with a red face, black and white head, warm brown upperparts, white underparts with buff flanks and breast patches, and black and yellow wings. The ivory-colored bill is long and pointed, and the tail is forked. Males have a slightly larger red area on the face than females. Juveniles have a plain brown head and a greyer back with pale breast patches. They are unmistakable due to their yellow wing stripes.⁸



¹ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/carduus>

² The American Goldfinch, *Carduelis tristis*, which depends even more on thistles than the European Goldfinch, breeds later still. See: **Bird Families of the World**, C. Harrison, Pub. Harry N Abrams, p.243, ISBN 0-8109-0706-2

³ <https://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/what-are-invasive-species>

⁴ <https://neotropical.birds.cornell.edu/Species-Account/nb/species/eurgol/overview>

⁵ “In Australia, European Goldfinches have only spread on cleared and cultivated land where traditional food plants such as thistles and other exotic weeds are available. Local copses of introduced trees are needed for nesting and roosting.” See: http://www.australianbushbirds.info/infocarduelis_carduelis.html

⁶ <http://nzbirdsonline.org.nz/species/european-goldfinch>

⁷ <https://teara.govt.nz/en/introduced-land-birds/page-12>

⁸ <https://www.beautyofbirds.com/goldfinch.html>

Mutations/Sub-species

Usually ‘The Goldfinch’ refers to the European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* as described. There are 14 sub-species of European Goldfinch with slight differences.⁹ The species has two major groups - a small Asian group, and a much larger European/African group. They each have distinct plumage patterns and colours. An example of a sub-species is the Himalayan Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis caniceps*.¹⁰ In this, there is a lack of black markings and the tawny plumage of the *Carduelis carduelis* is grey. As the European/African and Asian groups breed at their range boundaries, they are not separate species. Breeding between groups gives many colours. In addition, the European Goldfinch has many recognised colour mutations including: Tawny, Agate, Isabella, Pastel, Satinè, Yellow, Opal and Albino.



To add to the multitude of natural mutations, Goldfinches have also bred with Canaries, Siskins and Linnets. These crosses are usually sterile ‘mules’.

Bird names are sometimes confusing and changing. Despite its name, the American Goldfinch, *Carduelis tristis*, is not in the same genus, *Carduelis*, as the European Goldfinch.¹¹ In 1758, the American Goldfinch was part of the genus *Spinus*, with the Latin name *Spinus tristis*. In 1976 *Spinus* became part of the genus *Carduelis*. The bird then had the name *Carduelis tristis*. After new DNA studies; *Spinus* is no longer part of *Carduelis* and the American Goldfinch is again *Spinus tristis*.¹² Both names are in use in textbooks and on websites.



⁹ <https://www.worldbirdnames.org/bow/finches/>

¹⁰ <https://www.beautyofbirds.com/himalayangoldfinches.html>

¹¹ <https://forum.americanexpedition.us/american-goldfinch-information-facts-photos-and-artwork>

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_goldfinch