

Goldfinches and Thistles

By Sally Cureton

A favorite bird of many people is the perky little American Goldfinch (*Carduelis tristis*). As one of the latest birds to nest, they usually don't begin breeding in this area until July. Their delay in starting has been generally ascribed to coincide with the flowering time of the thistle plant, one of their primary food sources. The Goldfinch's nest is built of plant fibers and thistle down in a tree or shrub, 2 to 30 feet off the ground. Often it will be woven so tightly that it will actually hold water. There have been reports of nestlings drowning after a rainstorm. Each female will lay from 4 to 6 eggs which she will then incubate. When they hatch after about two weeks, both parents will feed them regurgitated seeds. In another 17 days or so, the young Goldfinch will leave the nest. The adults will raise up to three broods in a season.

The male Goldfinch is the one that is bright yellow. His vivid coloration is produced by carotenoid pigments found in the plant materials in his diet, which need to be available in his spring diet when the winter feathers are being replaced. This bright color is punctuated by black wings with white markings and a black forehead. The female is a rather drab little bird, enabling her to blend in to her surroundings while she is on the nest. In the winter months, the male will lose his bright color and look very similar to the female. A small bird, Goldfinches are about 5 inches long with a 9 inch wingspan, and weigh 12-14 grams.

There are approximately 140 species of finches in the world, including House Finch, Pine Siskin, and the Common Redpoll. Since there is a European Goldfinch in Britain that differs from ours the name American Goldfinch is used. Also known as "wild canary," for centuries they were a popular cage bird. Found throughout much of North America, Goldfinches are the state bird of New Jersey, Iowa and Washington. Their preferred habitat is a weedy field or open area where thistles and asters are common. They actually provide a valuable service by consuming large numbers of weed seeds.

American Goldfinches are active and acrobatic little birds. They fly in a bouncy manner and their distinctive *po-at-to-chip* call makes them easy to find and identify. They will flock together and may migrate or simply move around in one region during the winter months. Flocks may contain up to 300 birds and often include siskins and redpolls and tend to be somewhat nomadic, moving around to locate food sources. Goldfinch flocks have been known to move up to five miles a day between feeders.

And what they are looking for at those feeders is a thistle-like seed, called niger. This is the seed sold in stores to feed goldfinches. It is from a plant native to the highlands of Ethiopia. Niger is in the sunflower family, with yellow flowers and grows up to six feet tall. The seeds from this plant contain up to 40% oil and so are very high in calories. It has been used in the feeding of wild birds for more than 40 years. Originally it was called Niger Thistle, an erroneous labeling, since it is not a thistle. Recently efforts have been made to change the spelling to Nyjer seed.

In addition, there are many actual thistle plants in this country that the goldfinch uses as a food source in addition to the niger seed found in feeders. The Peterson Wildflower book lists 11 different types of thistle plants and at least half of these are listed as alien plants, ie they came to this country from Europe or Asia. Three of the most common ones in this area are Musk Thistle (Nodding Thistle), Canada Thistle, and Bull Thistle - all aliens. The first of these, Musk Thistle was introduced into the U.S. more than ninety years ago and is considered a noxious weed in many states. It is a member of the Aster family and grows to a height of 2-9 feet tall. It has dark green leaves and large purple flowers about 2 inches wide. Each plant can produce thousands of seeds. Because the large solitary flowers sometimes droop from the stem when they are large, it acquired the nick-name, Nodding Thistle.

Another common thistle plant is the Bull Thistle, a member of the daisy family. It also has a large purple flower head and each plant can produce up to 4000 seeds. This is a very prickly plant, with spiny leaves. It grows to a height of 2-6 feet, with flowers 1 ½ - 3 inches wide. As a biennial, it produces a rosette of leaves the first year and flowers the second year. Canada Thistle is a perennial also of the daisy family. It will grow to be 1-5 feet tall with long gray-green leaves. Also known as creeping thistle, this is the most common one in the U.S. Its flowers will be pink to purple and about ½-1 inch wide. With all of these, plus many other options available, the American Goldfinch thrives. And aren't we glad!