

Cassin's Finch

CASSIN'S FINCH (CF) is a small finch with many similarities to our year-round resident the house finch (HF). Like the HF, the Cassin's finch can be seen year round in this area, though not as frequently. Most Eldorado residents have seen the CF in the spring.

Physically, the two birds look very similar and are difficult to distinguish one from the other. But as you can see by a close study of Sibley's *Field Guide to Birds*, the CF male does not have streaked flanks; rather, the bright purplish red fades to a light color and then a pale white-gray on the underbelly. Both males have the reddish head, throat and upper chest, with indistinct brownish streaks on their back and wings. Especially when in breeding plumage, the CF has a bright red crown which sticks up on top of its head, like a punk rocker. The CF is 6.25 inches long and has a wingspan of 11.5 inches. Females (both CF & HF) are brownish with streaks on their belly and a brownish-gray back. I don't think I could tell the females apart, except by the company they keep! CFs are often seen in pairs, searching for food on the ground. Usually HFs are also around, but the two species move and hop differently on the ground. The call of the two birds is also quite different. Go to <http://www.naturesongs.com/pass.html> and choose Fringillidea (True Finches), which will take you to

the calls. Female calls are not as loud as the male's and are often called "whisper songs." "Call matching" has been observed, where a pair duplicates each other's flight calls precisely.

CFs prefer to nest in semiarid open conifers at higher elevations. The monogamous pair builds a cup nest in a tree and lays four to five eggs. Their diet consists of the buds, berries and seeds of conifers. The pair picks nests in different areas each year. Pair bonds may last more than a year, and the male feeds the female during incubation and brooding. Eggs hatch in 12 to 14 days, and the helpless young are developed enough to fledge at 14 days. Parents and young stay together for a few weeks but leave the nest area immediately. CFs have a tendency to roam, varying their movements and locations widely throughout their lives. Some birds winter in the highlands of central Mexico. Adult birds molt in late summer and replace all of their feathers.

The Cassin's Finch was named for Philadelphia ornithologist John Cassin. Cassin (1813-1869) was made honorary curator of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences in 1842. There are five species of western bird that bear his name.



—Pam Herdine