

## RETURN OF THE FINCHES (Originally published January 1977)

Arriving just in time to usher in a new year, the purple finches have returned to our bird feeder. Once we would have been happy to see them, but after years of acquaintance we now view their reappearance more as a return of the welfare chiselers.

We don't belong to the Audubon Society, nor do we qualify as a genuine, addicted bird watcher. Our bird watching is done in sedentary comfort. Some years ago we were given one of those elongated clear plastic tubes with six feeding holes and aluminum perches, and it dangles on a string from beneath the roof overhang, high off the ground near the bay tree, just beside one of the breakfast room windows. It is no more than ten feet from where we sit to drink the morning coffee and suffer through the daily editorial pages of the *Atlanta Constitution*.

This feeder appeals only to a select group of birds who, out of perversity perhaps, turn up their beaks at any type of feed in it except sunflower seeds. We persist in filling it only because we have grown attached to a family of chickadees and a family of titmice (titmouses?) who seem to be year-round tenants somewhere in the neighborhood. An eccentric song sparrow and a couple of ratty looking cardinals who have mastered the art of balancing on its short perches also visit it at times. But regularly, in season, it is also a favorite lunch counter for a horde of purple finches and also, when they deign to appear, a similar horde of evening grosbeaks.

We're very fond of titmice and chickadees. They are small, neat, well-groomed little birds that flit from bay tree to feeder, picking out one seed at a time, and then repairing to the nearest branch. There they place the seed firmly between their feet and peck away at it until they can successfully free the meat within. This is a time-consuming process, and the little birds are usually quite well behaved and patient about the whole business. And even though sunflower seeds rank as the caviar and truffles of bird fare, we don't feel imposed upon, supplying our polite friends with a gourmet dish.

Even the cardinals and sparrows don't really disturb us when they try to horn in. They are big and awkward enough on the perches so that getting a seed out presents a real challenge. They tire easily and generally are not persistent, and their seed consumption can be tolerated.

But the purple finches and the grosbeaks are another matter. Usually a scout (nearly always a female) is sent out to sample the supply, and a few days afterwards the horde arrives. The male finch is colorful and handsome, but ordinarily he is outnumbered

and intimidated by his brawling harem. The female finches are a scraggly bunch that look like dirty, overweight, bedraggled sparrows, and all of them descend on the feeder at once to monopolize the perches where they are expert at perch sitting and feeding continuously. Their strong gallinaceous beaks are such that they can inhale a seed, crack the shell, spit out the fragments and chomp away in monotonous gluttony without fluttering a feather except when challenged by another hungry sister trying to elbow in for the free handout. They remind us of a local group of ancient dowager widows attacking the hors d'oeuvre table at a cocktail party. They are belligerent and anything but polite and assume that sunflower seeds belong to no one but female finches. The chickadees and titmice don't stand a chance when these girls take over.

So, we sit and suffer in silent frustration watching the sunflower seed level in the feeder drop like the plummeting mercury of a thermometer in a blizzard. We vow every year to stop this foolishness and let the greedy finches shift for themselves. We would hate to disappoint the chickadees and titmice, but someday these out of state chiselers will push us too far. How did these birds get on welfare anyway?

(c) *The Bulletin of the Muscogee County (Georgia) Medical Society*, "Doctor's Lounge", Feb 1977, Vol. XXIV No. 2, p.17