

European Goldfinch in the Western Great Lakes Region: A 2020 Update

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European Goldfinch is a beautiful fringillid native to most of Europe and patchily distributed east to western Asia. As it is a popular cagebird, small populations have gone through periods of establishment throughout the world. This includes in North America, where over the past 18 years a new population has slowly been establishing. Although scattered reports have occurred across most of the western Great Lakes region, this population has been mostly concentrated along the southwestern shore of Lake Michigan.

The appearance of European Goldfinches in this region is rumored to have its origin with the suspected release of numerous exotics from a suburban exotic pets dealer going out of business in Chicagoland in 2002 (Dinsmore and Silcock 2004). The most numerous of the species reportedly released was *Carduelis carduelis*. A thorough report on the status of the European Goldfinch in the Western Great Lakes for *North American Birds* (Craves 2008) firmly established the species as gaining momentum, while acknowledging that previous attempts by the species to establish itself in North America (in New York during the early twentieth century) were met with failure (Griscom 1923).

Over a decade has passed since Craves's report. How has this new population fared?

European Goldfinch continues to stabilize and establish itself in the southwestern Great Lakes region. Since 2009, the species has been reported in 20 counties in Wisconsin and nine counties in Illinois. In addition, a handful of reports have come from Michigan, concentrated in the Detroit area. Overwhelmingly, the reports and subsequent photos have belonged to that of the dark-crowned, nominate, "Western" (*carduelis*) subspecies group, but there is a photo of a presumed gray-crowned, "Eastern" (*caniceps*) from near Detroit, Michigan (Peterson 2010). Another pale-crowned

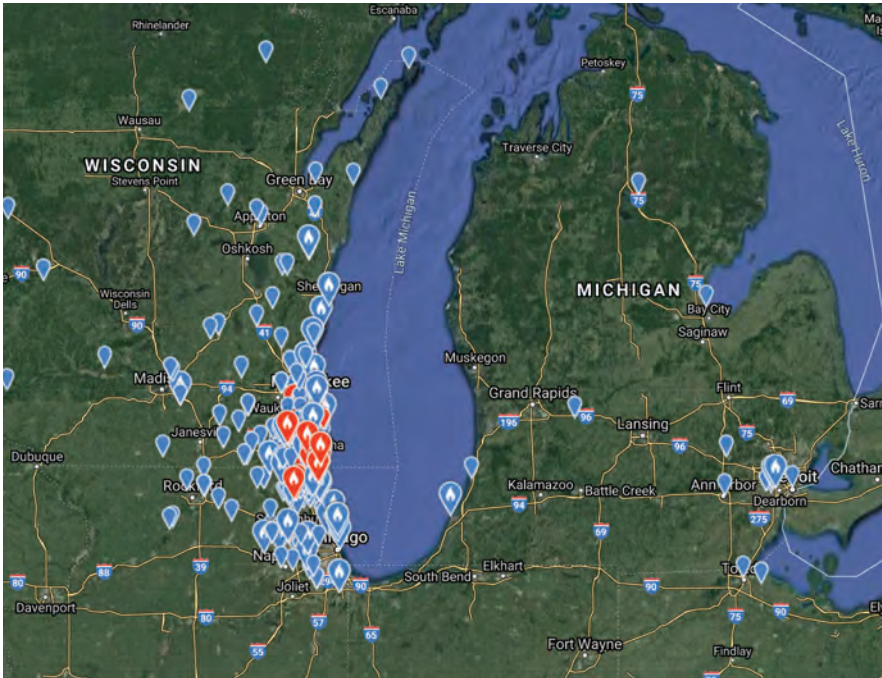
bird was photographed in Lake County, Illinois in Mar 2014 (eBird checklist S17472171), but its subspecific identity seems less straightforward.

The expansive growth of eBird since 2008 (Sullivan et al. 2014), along with the encouragement from eBird to keep track of exotics, has allowed for a clearer picture of this species's breeding status to emerge. Although similar in breeding habitat, European Goldfinch breed much earlier in the season than American Goldfinch, and there is little overlap in competition for breeding space. Pair bonding in European Goldfinches begins as early as March, and breeding begins in earnest during late

An adult European Goldfinch feeding in nonnative European burdock (*Arctium*). Carol Stream, DuPage Co, Illinois. 22 Dec 2020. Photo © Jeffrey Boland.



EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH IN THE WESTERN GREAT LAKES REGION



Records of European Goldfinch in the Lake Michigan region. Map image provided by eBird (www.ebird.org) and created on 16 Mar 2021.

spring and early summer, with two broods being reported from its native range (Clement et al. 2020). American Goldfinch, by contrast, does not begin breeding until late June and early July in the western Great Lakes. Since 2009, Wisconsin has had over 15 unique confirmed breeding reports listed in eBird; all have either confirmed breeding codes or photos of recently fledged young. All of the breeding records have occurred in the far southeast counties of Racine and Kenosha, save one report from Dodge County, just northwest of Milwaukee.

In Illinois, there have been over 20 unique breeding records spanning from 2009 to the present. These are almost exclusive to

This is just part of a flock of at least 95 European Goldfinches, nicely illustrating the growth in numbers of this species over the past 19 years. These birds are perched above a stand of nonnative European teasel (*Dipsacus*), the seeds of which they were readily consuming. Waukegan, Lake Co, Illinois. 1 Jan 2020.

Photo © Jeff Bilsky.



far northeastern Lake County, with a lone breeding record from neighboring McHenry County to the west. In some locations, such as Waukegan Beach along the Lake Michigan shoreline, breeding has been recorded annually since 2013. Here I have attempted to tally only unique examples of confirmed breeding, as multiple sightings of the same breeding pair can be commonplace in some of the more heavily birded areas in Lake County. In no way should a review of eBird records be considered exhaustive, but these examples are certainly telling of the species's increase, especially considering that Craves (2008) reported receiving only six breeding reports of European Goldfinch for the Western Great Lakes region between 2003 and 2006.

In the nonbreeding season, dispersal is dependent on favored seed crops, on which they rely almost exclusively throughout the year (Clement et al. 2020); these include invasive, non-native teasel and thistle, which is represented by both native and non-native species. Despite their being somewhat nomadic and willing to visit feeders, dispersal has still been rather limited to the documented breeding range. High counts include a flock of 50 from Kenosha County, Wisconsin (Hansen 2019) and a flock exceeding 95 individuals from Lake County, Illinois (Bilsky 2021).

Although there is growing evidence of an established population of European Goldfinches along the southwestern shoreline of Lake Michigan, the population has not shown a large expansion beyond that area. A thorough follow-up on the status and distribution of this species following the Craves (2008) report is needed to further understand this species's expansion and continued establishment in the region.

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Juvenile European Goldfinches are now reported every summer from northeastern Illinois and southeastern Wisconsin. They begin breeding much earlier in the year than American Goldfinches—as early as March. This fledged juvenile European Goldfinch was photographed in Franklin, Milwaukee Co, Wisconsin on 30 Jun 2016, a date on which American Goldfinches should be only beginning to court. Photo © John Mishefshe.



An adult European Goldfinch feeding on thistle. Lake Forest, Lake Co, Illinois. Jul 2020. Photo © John Edmondson.