



The State Bird of Iowa: American Goldfinch

Flashes of yellow bow and swoop, flutter and perch on flowers and shrubs along field and woodland edges. Energetic birds, the goldfinches, liven and color natural scenes, startling in their contrasting colors, yet soft as the down on a thistle.

The American goldfinch (*Carduelis tristis*) is a small bird, a little smaller than a sparrow, with a wingspan of less than nine inches. In summer the males are boldly-colored, with a bright yellow body and black wings, tail, and top of the head. The females have less conspicuous colors, with an olive body and dark tail and wings, with two distinctive white wing bars. As winter approaches, male goldfinches attain the same plumage as the females, making them harder to recognize, and leading some people to think that the goldfinches have left their feeders.

Goldfinches are beautiful and entertaining birds that are easily observed as they feed in fields or woodland edges or while perched at winter feeders. They are also very vocal birds, singing while perched or in flight. Sometimes small flocks of goldfinches will sing together as a group, rendered phonetically as "po-TA-to-chip, po-TA-to-chip" or "per-CHICK-o-ree, per-CHICK-or-ree." While in flight, they sing in unison with the bows of their undulating flights. In spring, the males' more plaintive call sometimes rendered phonetically as "dear-me, see-me."

Like all finches, goldfinches have short, strong beaks, well-designed for breaking open seeds. Their favorite seed plants are thistles, but they will eat seeds from a variety of plants, including asters, goldenrods, and dandelions. Both males and females join flocks during the summer months and travel over fields and woodlands, displaying their unique undulating flight. In winter, some goldfinches migrate as far south as Mexico. Others remain in Iowa due, in part, to well-stocked bird feeders or natural supplies of thistle and other wild seeds that remain available throughout the winter months. Goldfinches will feed alongside purple finches, house finches, and pine siskins at thistle feeders. They prefer niger thistle seed. Remember that, to attract goldfinches to your birdfeeder, it is important that there is water and shelter nearby.

Pairs of goldfinches begin nesting when thistle, milkweed, or cattail down is available with which to line their nests. The nests are so thick and dense that they can hold water, and young goldfinches have been known to drown while the parents are away during a rain storm. Most nests are built in a forked tree branch or in the crotch of several branches, usually located along the brushy edge of a field or pasture. Goldfinches lay four to six pale

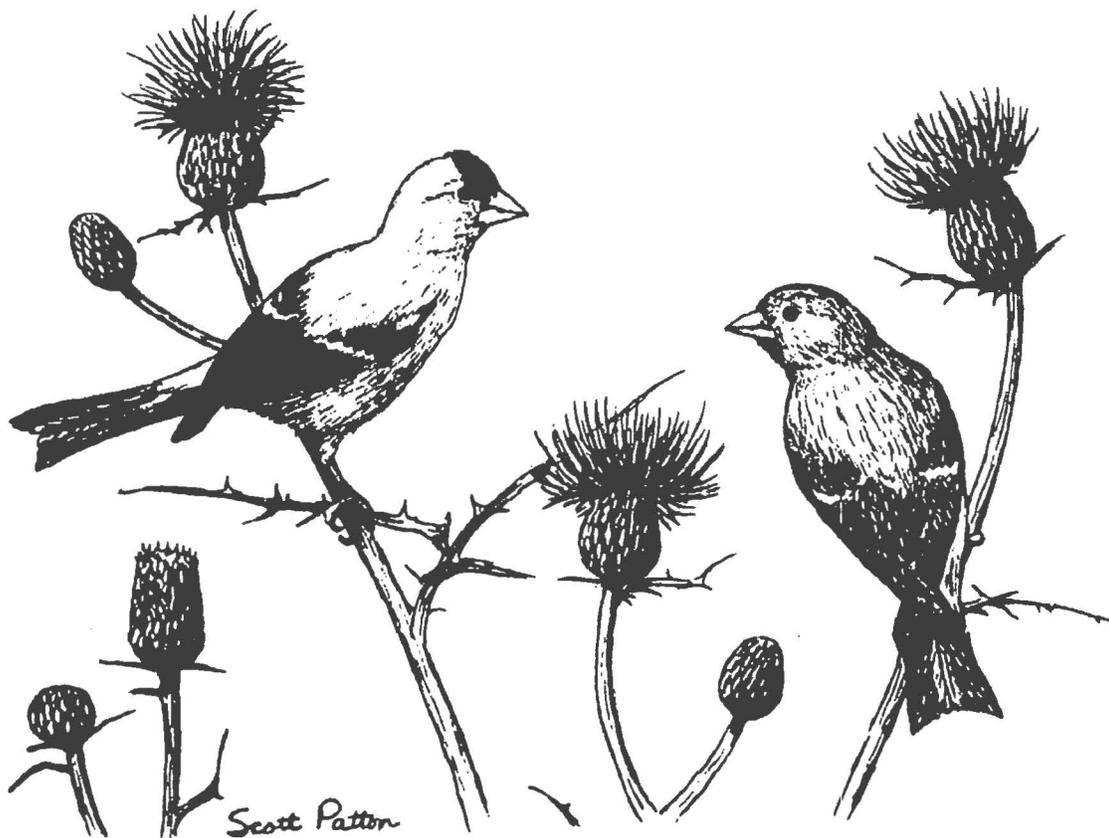


blue eggs, each about 5/8 inch in diameter.

Goldfinches are popular birds, and there has been some concern that their population may be declining. In fact, some studies have indicated a possible decline in the number of goldfinches in Iowa. Whether this reflects a natural fluctuation in the goldfinch population or a real and dangerous decline in the number of goldfinches is not clear. The goldfinch's habitat, which must contain a mixture of grassland and shrub plants, seems to be adequate among Iowa's farms, pastures, and woodland borders. Future bird surveys and studies may help us learn more about any possible threats to goldfinch populations in Iowa.

The lively, colorful goldfinch is a common bird of open fields, woodland edges, and backyard gardens. It is a very charismatic bird, well-suited to the character of Iowa. The American goldfinch was officially designated the State Bird of Iowa on May 22, 1933. At the time it was designated, it was known scientifically as *Spinus tristis*. Most books now use the scientific name *Carduelis tristis*. The goldfinch was nominated to be the State Bird of Iowa by the Iowa Ornithologists' Union, and the proposal passed the legislature because of the backing of that group and because the goldfinch is a year-round resident of Iowa that is easily recognized by Iowans.

By Dan Cohen
Buchanan County Conservation Board





How the Goldfinch Became Iowa's State Bird

In February 1926, Iowa Ornithologists' Union (IOU) president Walter Rosene noted in a letter to members that Nebraska had recently named a state bird. He wrote that "if each state has its state flower, why should we not have a state bird? It would be interesting to hear from all members in regard to this matter, and I would welcome letters offering suggestions."

Two months later, he wrote that a few suggestions had been received but not enough to reach a consensus. Margo Frankel from Des Moines suggested that the group "choose an all-year-round bird for Iowa - downy woodpecker or chickadee." Althea Sherman of National suggested the goldfinch as "a beautiful bird, easily recognized by everyone. It is of common occurrence in most parts of our state throughout the whole year." Rosene suggested more nominations for discussion at the spring meeting in Atlantic.

No further action was taken on this matter until June 1931 when Dr. F.L.R. Roberts, in a president's letter to the membership, wrote that "there is a popular demand for a state bird, and it is appropriate that we should be active in choosing one." He then appointed a committee, consisting of two former IOU presidents, Walter Bennett and Walter Rosene, to prepare recommendations to be presented at the next annual meeting.

The next spring at the banquet, members prepared a list of birds for consideration. After much debate, the goldfinch was selected and was unanimously voted as the IOU's choice for state bird. It was chosen because it was commonly known and found in the state year-round.

Former IOU president Arthur Palas was chosen as chair of a committee to present this petition to the Iowa Legislature in January 1933. Representative J. Wilbur Dole later recalled that Mr. Palas approached him during the first week of March to present this matter. Mr. Palas, it seems, had forgotten his assignment.

Several members of the legislature approached Representative Dole and asked why such birds as the robin, bluebird, or quail should not be considered. He stated that other states had already selected those and no one pressed the matter further. Others asked why Iowa even needed a state bird. He replied that there were only four other states that did not have a state bird. This answer seemed to satisfy their queries.



On March 21, 1933, Dole called up the resolution and spoke in favor of its passage. It passed unanimously by voice vote. He made the only speech in support of the resolution; none was made in opposition. Similar action was taken in the Senate.



The text of the resolution adopted by the Iowa Legislature is as follows:

Whereas, the twenty-sixth General Assembly of the state of Iowa, in the year 1897, by concurrent resolution, adopted the wild rose as the state flower of Iowa, the record of which is duly recorded in Senate Journal, pages 1124 and 1164 and in House Journal, page 10235; and

Whereas, many states have not only adopted certain named flowers as their state flower but have also adopted certain named birds as their state birds, and

Whereas, the Iowa Ornithologists' Union, an association comprising students and the lovers of birds, residing within our state, at their annual meeting held in Des Moines, in May 1932, by resolution and vote designated the Eastern Goldfinch as their choice for a state bird and recommended that said Eastern Goldfinch be adopted as the official state bird of Iowa, therefore

Be it resolved by the House of Representatives, the Senate concurring, that the Eastern Goldfinch, *Spinus tristis tristis*, is hereby designated and shall hereafter be officially known as the state bird of Iowa.

A revealing glimpse of how our perceptions of birds have changed can be seen by reading the byline and story in the March 27, 1933 *Des Moines Register* article about Iowa's new state bird. It read, "Goldfinch, Iowa's Official Bird, Is an Aid to Farmer." Further into the story, it stated that "the goldfinch is valuable to farmers because of the great quantity of weed seed they consume during a season and the war they wage upon cankerworms, plant lice, small grasshoppers, and beetles." How many people view goldfinches, or birds in general, in this manner now?

Much of the information for this article came from a booklet entitled "The Goldfinch: Official Iowa Bird," written by Josephine Baumgartner and Mabel Goshorn Tate, the editors of the Des Moines Audubon Society's newsletter, and published on May 29, 1945. J. Wilbur Dole's account of the events is included in a letter to the editors of the newsletter.



Activity: State Bird Search

Objective: Students will identify the state birds of the 50 states in the United States.

Materials: Worksheets, pencils, map of the United States, and encyclopedias

Procedure: Hand out worksheets and pencils. Have the students use encyclopedias to identify the state bird of each state. On the map of the United States, paste a picture of the state bird on that state. Discuss why this bird might have been chosen.

Alabama	Montana
Alaska	Nebraska
Arizona	Nevada
Arkansas	New Hampshire
California	New Jersey
Colorado	New Mexico
Connecticut	New York
Delaware	North Carolina
Florida	North Dakota
Georgia	Ohio
Hawaii	Oklahoma
Idaho	Oregon
Illinois	Pennsylvania
Indiana	Rhode Island
Iowa	South Carolina
Kansas	South Dakota
Kentucky	Tennessee
Louisiana	Texas
Maine	Utah
Maryland	Vermont
Massachusetts	Virginia
Michigan	Washington
Minnesota	West Virginia
Mississippi	Wisconsin
Missouri	Wyoming



Key to Worksheet: The state birds of the 50 states of the United States

Alabama	Northern flicker	Montana	Western meadowlark
Alaska	Ptarmigan	Nebraska	Western meadowlark
Arizona	Cactus wren	Nevada	Mountain bluebird
Arkansas	Northern mockingbird	New Hampshire	Purple finch
California	California quail	New Jersey	American goldfinch
Colorado	Lark bunting	New Mexico	Roadrunner
Connecticut	American robin	New York	Eastern bluebird
Delaware	Blue hen	North Carolina	Northern cardinal
Florida	Northern mockingbird	North Dakota	Western meadowlark
Georgia	Brown thrasher	Ohio	Northern cardinal
Hawaii	Nene	Oklahoma	Scissor-tailed flycatcher
Idaho	Mountain bluebird	Oregon	Western meadowlark
Illinois	Northern cardinal	Pennsylvania	Ruffed grouse
Indiana	Northern cardinal	Rhode Island	Rhode Island red
Iowa	American goldfinch	South Carolina	Carolina wren
Kansas	Western meadowlark	South Dakota	Ring-necked pheasant
Kentucky	Northern cardinal	Tennessee	Northern mockingbird
Louisiana	Brown pelican	Texas	Northern mockingbird
Maine	Black-capped chickadee	Utah	California gull
Maryland	Baltimore oriole	Vermont	Hermit thrush
Massachusetts	Black-capped chickadee	Virginia	Northern cardinal
Michigan	American robin	Washington	American goldfinch
Minnesota	Common loon	West Virginia	Northern cardinal
Mississippi	Northern mockingbird	Wisconsin	American robin
Missouri	Eastern bluebird	Wyoming	Western meadowlark