

Commonly Confused Winter Birds

NH Audubon.org



Some birds can be tricky. House Finches and Purple Finches are often confused—so are Cooper’s and Sharp-shinned Hawks. Here are some tips to tell these and others apart. Bird guides like the free [Merlin Bird ID App](#) can be an invaluable resource with many photos.

House Finch vs Purple Finch



Photo by Grace McCulloch

Male House Finch

Male House Finches are **fire engine red** on the head, breast, and rump. However, they have **brown on much of their back**.



Photo by Pam Geiger

Female House Finch

Female House Finches are all brown.



Photo by Roger Frieden

Male Purple Finch

Male Purple Finches appear to have been **“dipped in raspberry juice”** with color on head and back. Less streaking on back than House Finch.

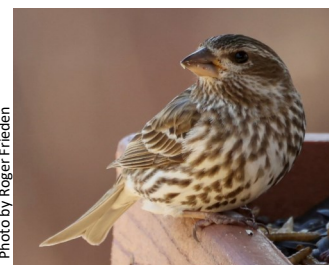


Photo by Roger Frieden

Female Purple Finch

Female Purple Finches are brown with a **white stripe above the eye**.

Additional Notes:

- House Finches have a mostly squared off tail, while Purple Finches have a deeply notched tail.
- Purple Finches are more common than House Finches north of the White Mountains in New Hampshire (NH), while House Finches are more common south.
- If you live in central or southern NH check your finches carefully as both species can be found here.

Test Your Knowledge:



Photo by Pam Hunt

Answer at Bottom of Page

These three sparrows can be confusing...

You are likely to see two of these in winter, but the Chipping Sparrow is very rare during the winter.



Photo by Jason Lambert

American Tree Sparrow

- Rusty cap.
- Gray line above eye with small rusty line through eye.
- Gray/white breast, sometimes with a spot.
- Nicknamed the “Winter Chipping Sparrow.”



Photo by Pam Geiger

House Sparrow (female)

- Females are brown with pale brown to white eyeline.
- Notice the plain drab brown cap and the more stout, blunt bill compared to other



Photo by Pam Hunt

Chipping Sparrow (winter plumage)

- VERY rare in winter; American Tree Sparrows are far more common.
- Brown cap, dull white line above eye, and a gray/white breast (no spot).

Answer to Test Your Knowledge: male Purple Finch (left) and male House Finch (right)

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Cooper’s Hawk vs Sharp-shinned Hawk



Photo by Pam Hunt

Adult Cooper’s Hawk



Photo by Pam Hunt

Juvenile Cooper’s Hawk



Photo by Stephanie Parkinson

**Juvenile
Sharp-shinned Hawk**



Photo by Pam Hunt

**Adult
Sharp-shinned Hawk**

- Cooper’s Hawks are generally larger, although the female Sharp-shinned can be the same size as the male Cooper’s.
- **Think:** crow sized.
- Head appears larger and more blocky.
- Head projects past wings in flight.
- Tip of tail rounded.

- Sharp-shinned Hawks are generally smaller.
- **Think:** Blue-jay sized.
- Smaller head and stubby neck.
- Gray on head may give appearance of a hood, vs a cap on the Cooper’s.
- Tip of tail squared off.

Tip: These two hawks are difficult to tell apart on the best of days! If you are at all unsure report it as a Sharp-shinned/ Cooper’s Hawk.

All of these woodpeckers have red heads, yet the Red-headed Woodpecker is actually the rarest!

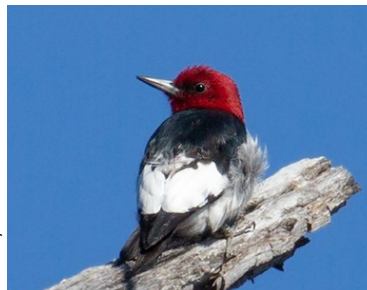


Photo by Len Medlock

Red-headed Woodpecker

- Red-headed Woodpeckers are VERY rare in New Hampshire.
- Check that yours is not a Pileated Woodpecker or a Red-bellied Woodpecker.



Photo by Grace McCulloch

Pileated Woodpecker

- Largest woodpecker in New Hampshire.
- Bright red cap & bold white stripes on head & neck.



Photo by Grace McCulloch

Red-bellied Woodpecker

- Black and white barred back.
- Red tinge on belly rarely seen but always have a red nape (or patch on back of neck).
- This is a female. For males the top of the head is red too.