

# TRICKY FINCHES

Learn to identify this challenging trio of red finches









**THE CHALLENGE:** Finches are common visitors to many yards and feeding stations, but they are notoriously difficult to identify. Three species are particularly tricky in North America: House Finch, Purple Finch, and Cassin's Finch. Adult males all show red coloration of varying shades and intensity, and females and immature males are brown and streaky. Although they may seem confusing at first glance, you can use many clues to help sort out this group. Keep in mind that Pine Siskin, female Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and other species may also resemble finches or be mistaken for finches.

**KEY POINTS:**

- 1. WHERE ARE YOU?**  
Location is a huge clue since the three species have different ranges and habitats
- 2. SIZE AND SHAPE**  
Look at the bill, head, wing length, and tail
- 3. COLOR PATTERN**  
Males differ in the shade, intensity, and location of red coloration; females have different head patterns and streaking

## INTRODUCTION

Which finches are we talking about?

	HOUSE FINCH	PURPLE FINCH	CASSIN'S FINCH
MALES			
FEMALES			

## 2. SIZE AND SHAPE

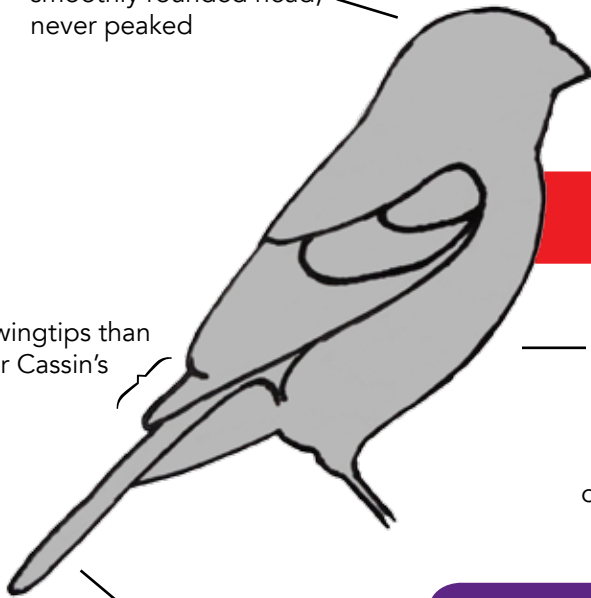
smoothly rounded head,  
never peaked

short, rounded bill

◀ **HOUSE FINCH**

shorter wingtips than  
Purple or Cassin's

overall rather long and slender



long, rounded tail  
sometimes very  
slightly notched

often shows puffy crown

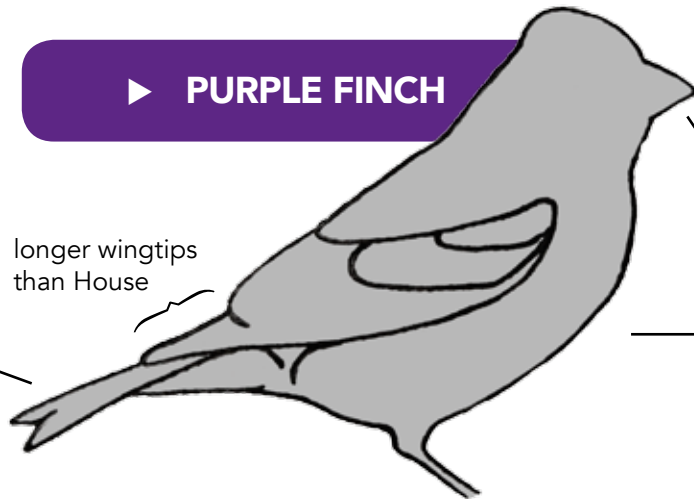
▶ **PURPLE FINCH**

longer wingtips  
than House

notched tail

thick, slightly  
curved bill

chunky body



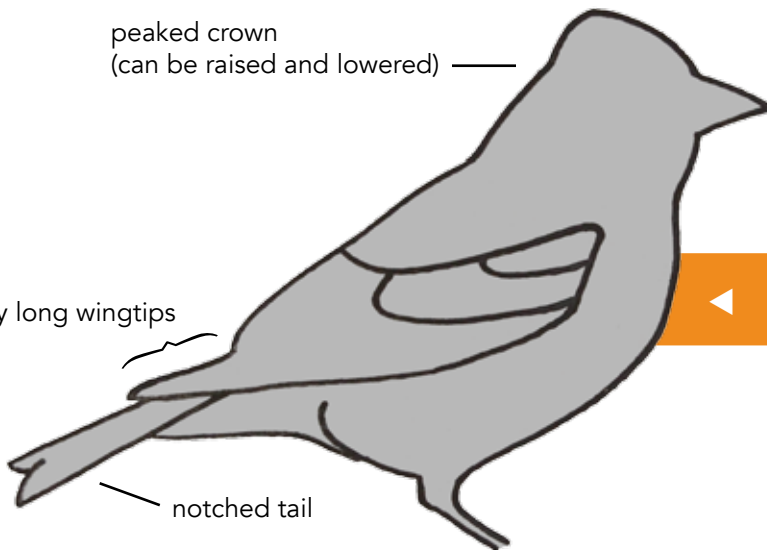
peaked crown  
(can be raised and lowered)

long and usually straight bill

◀ **CASSIN'S FINCH**

very long wingtips

notched tail



# 3. COLOR AND PATTERN

## MALES

### HOUSE FINCH



Look for the contrast between red and brown. This photo shows how the red is concentrated on the head and breast, whereas the sides and wings lack color. Also notice the crisp streaking on the side of the body and the more curved upper mandible compared to Purple or Cassin's Finch.



This photo of a male House Finch on a feeder illustrates the more slender, long-tailed shape when compared with the other two species. Also notice where the red is concentrated: the head and upper breast, and the rump. Other parts look colder gray, with distinct streaks on the sides.

### PURPLE FINCH



Here is a male Purple Finch on a feeder. The bright raspberry red color is obvious on the head and breast. There are no distinct streaks on the sides like a male House Finch would show.



Another view of a male Purple Finch, showing the overall bright coloration. The entire body looks infused with color, like it was dipped in raspberry juice.

### CASSIN'S FINCH



The key on male Cassin's Finch is the very bright, contrasting crown. Look at how much darker rose-red the crown of this bird is compared with the pale pink color on the rest of the head and upper breast. Another clue is the streaked undertail coverts: on male Purple Finches, these would be clean white.



Look at how bright and contrasting the red crown is on this male Cassin's Finch. The rest of the head, throat, and upper breast is very pale pink. The white eyering is unique to Cassin's Finch, and while more helpful on females, can be obvious on males, too.

## FEMALES\*

### HOUSE FINCH



Female House Finches give the impression of a washed out, nondescript bird. Compare the uniformly pale brown head of this bird with the contrasting dark brown-and-white markings of a female Purple Finch.



Another image of a female House Finch that shows the pale grayish-brown coloration, the absence of much pattern on the head, and diffuse or blurry streaking below. The base color of the underparts is off-white, not bright.

### PURPLE FINCH



This female Purple Finch shows a typically bold face pattern, with a bright white eyebrow and malar ("mustache") stripe. Also notice the distinct triangular streaks on the underparts and the thick bill.



Another view of a female Purple Finch. Check out the bill size compared with House Finch! This individual shows a particularly broad white eyebrow and malar on the face. The base color of the underparts is bright white, unlike the off-white color on House Finch.

### CASSIN'S FINCH



The head pattern on a female Cassin's Finch is more contrasting than on a House Finch. Other features include the longer bill, shorter tail, and more peaked head shape. Compared with Purple Finch, look for the streaked undertail coverts and more subdued face pattern.



This photo illustrates the streaked undertail coverts of a female Cassin's Finch. Compared with House Finch, note the extremely long wings (see how far the wingtips reach along the tail?) and bolder face pattern (but not quite as bold as Purple Finch).

\*Some first-year males are indistinguishable from females in the field. However, the female-plumaged male birds often sing full songs, which females never do.