



## House Finch

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**SCIENTIFIC NAME:** *Carpodacus mexicanus*. From the Greek *carpo* meaning fruits and *dacus* meaning biting. The specific epithet *mexicanus* refers to the once more southerly distribution of the species.

**DESCRIPTION:** The house finch is sexually dimorphic. Males and females are both about 6 inches in total length, but only the male is boldly colored. His head, throat, chest, and rump are red to orange (occasionally yellow). Below his colorful bib, his underparts and sides are streaked. The female lacks the male's bright colors, but is more boldly streaked all over.

**DISTRIBUTION:** Thanks to introductions in the eastern United States, the house finch now occurs in every continental state, as well as at the southern edge of Canada and south through much of Mexico. In Arizona, the species occurs in most habitats below 6,000 feet; at higher elevations in extreme northern Arizona it is replaced by Cassin's finch as the local breeding species.

**HABITAT:** In Arizona, the house finch occupies a wide variety of habitats during the breeding season, ranging from low, brushy desert and riparian forests to mid-elevation pinyon-juniper and pine-oak woodlands. Urban and cultivated

habitats support them year-round. Surface water is often a key element of their habitat. Pairs and (nonbreeding season) small flocks are seen at tanks, seeps, and, in town, at birdbaths and sprinklers.

**BIOLOGY:** Urbanites know this species as a persistent and not unmelodious if repetitive singer. The cheerful song consists of three-note phrases sung at high pitch, with vigor. Males are often seen vocalizing from the outer branches of a tree, a fence, or a clothesline. Some urban observers may not distinguish this native from the ubiquitous house sparrows transplanted from Europe, dismissing both as "dicky birds" that sometimes leave messes on patio furniture.

House finches in Arizona have a fairly lengthy breeding season, extending from March through August. As the male watches, but doesn't help, the female builds a nest of twigs, grasses, hair, yarn, or whatever is available. The typical clutch of three to five eggs takes about 14 days to hatch; the young fledge 14 to 16 days later. Only the female incubates, but the male feeds her and helps feed the nestlings. Although neither adult cleans the nest, they may use it again for a second clutch.

Contrary to the Greek meaning of its scientific name, the house

finch is not primarily a fruit eater. Seeds are also consumed, and in breeding season, insects are a mainstay, especially for nestlings.

Nest depredation by ground squirrels and snakes is a problem, even when the nest is in the spiniest of chollas. In urban settings, house cats are the primary threat.

**STATUS:** Although house finches appear to have declined in some urban areas where house sparrows have become more common, nowhere is the species imperiled. It is not a candidate for Federal listing as endangered, and it is not a species of special concern in Arizona.

**MANAGEMENT NEEDS:** The house finch has no special management needs. The species thrives in close contact with humans, and urban areas offer safe harbor year-round. Perhaps the only problem it faces is an occasional outbreak of disease precipitated by backyard feeders maintained into summer, and contaminated by pigeons and doves. Many conservationists advocate closing down feeders in hot weather for that reason, although if feeders are kept very clean the problem can be minimized, if not entirely avoided. 🦋