

Lawrence's Goldfinch

BY TERRY B. JOHNSON • ILLUSTRATION BY ZACKERY ZDINAK

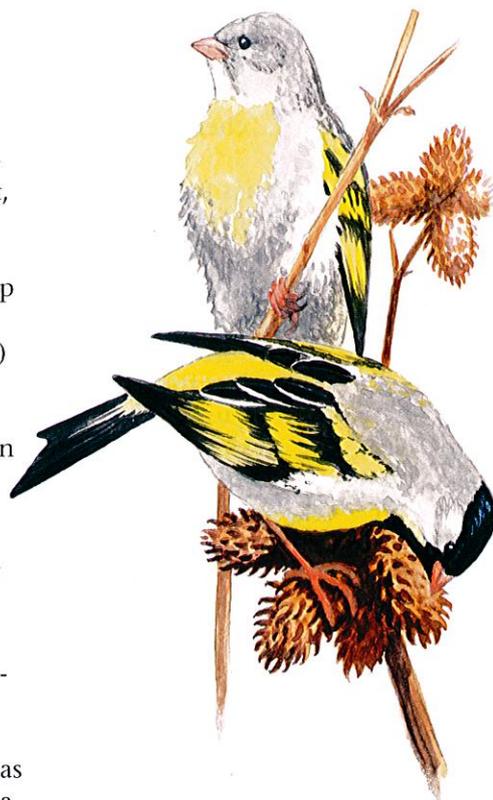
SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Carduelis lawrencei*. The genus literally means goldfinch in Latin. The specific epithet honors George Newbold Lawrence (1839-1907), an American businessman, collector, and ornithologist.

DESCRIPTION: A diminutive 4-4.75 inches long, Lawrence's goldfinch is one of three goldfinches native to Arizona. The male's black face and throat, surrounding a flesh-colored bill, are distinctive. His gray head and back, and yellow breast (not belly) and rump distinguish him from our other goldfinches, the American (*Carduelis tristis*) and the lesser (*Carduelis psaltria*). The female Lawrence's is also grayer above and has brighter-yellow wing bars than females of the other two species, but is more challenging to identify than the male. Immatures are nondescript grayish-brown, with tinges of yellow and faint streaks on the breast.

DISTRIBUTION: Year-round from California south into northern Baja. Irregular fall movements sometimes take this species as far east as west Texas and south to northern Sonora. Arizona is within the erratic August through April range. A few nesting records are known here, near Parker, on the Bill Williams Delta, and in the Verde River drainage near Phoenix. However, fieldwork for the Arizona Breeding Bird Atlas over the past seven years, including at least one "good" Lawrence's year, failed to locate a single new breeding occurrence. When Lawrence's is present in Arizona, it primarily occurs in the southern half, but may extend into the central part of the state.

HABITAT: Desertscrub, arid foothills, and lower mountains and valleys near water sources are typical habitats for this species, in all parts of the regular

and irregular range. In Arizona, riparian woodlands, washes, weedy fields, and ditches near ponds and streams tend to be favored haunts.



BIOLOGY: Aside from its propensity for irregular seasonal movements, Lawrence's goldfinch is much like many other native finches in terms of its biology. In winter and spring, it may be found alone or in mixed flocks with other goldfinches. Sometimes the flocks are quite large, though they seem less cohesive than the flocks of some species, such as the closely-related pine siskin (*Carduelis pinus*). Foraging flocks tend to roll across an area, searching for seeds, with individuals leapfrogging each other much like sparrows and other goldfinches. At the spur of a moment, or the approach of an avian predator (accipiter hawks are

prominent among them), the entire flock may take off in flight that seems amazingly well coordinated. The tinkling call, sometimes described as *tink-oo* or *tink-l*, is mostly given in flight, but sometimes from a perch (typically in low vegetation).

We have so little opportunity to study the nesting habits of the species in Arizona, we must look to California for relevant information. There, courtship begins as early as February-March, pairs have bonded by March-April, and nests are built in April-July. Clutches are laid in late April-July and average three to six eggs. The female incubates, and the male brings food to her and later for her to pass to the young. By August, most young have fledged, mixed-age flocks are re-forming, and the cycle continues.

STATUS: Lawrence's goldfinch is less common and more locally distributed than other goldfinches, but it is neither rare nor endangered, nor is it a candidate for state or federal listing. Its numbers vary greatly from one year and location to another, but no change in numbers has been evident over the long term.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: None, other than maintenance or enhancement of the scrub and brushy habitats that it occupies. However, restoration ecology applied to abandoned agricultural lands and arid-lands watercourses would benefit a number of other species, and this one when it shows up. 🦋

.....
When Terry Johnson lived in Tucson years ago, among his favored haunts was the Ruthrauf Sewage Treatment Plant, where Lawrence's goldfinches sometimes hunted for seeds. Seeing them was a scintillating experience.