

## COLUMNS

# Campbell Vaughn: American goldfinches spotted dining on blooming sunflowers

**Campbell Vaughn** Columnist

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Looking out my bedroom window last evening, I spotted a bird that I haven't seen in years in my backyards. A pair of American goldfinches were feasting on some blooming sunflowers that sprouted from under a birdfeeder that I let grow.

I had put nothing but sunflowers in one of the three feeders I have off my porch and after the dove and cow birds throw them all over the place, some of them decided to germinate. I probably have 20 sunflowers blooming right now.

If you are a bird lover, that is a big deal.

The American Goldfinch is the bird that made the cover of my bird North American bird identification book. They are that stunning. They weren't eating the food in the feeders, but eating the seed right off the yellow sunflowers. It was almost hard to see with the bright yellow birds mixed with bright yellow flowers.

The American goldfinch (*Spinus tristis*), also known as the "lightning bird", is a small bird native to much of the United States and southern Canada.

These yellow beauties are the state bird of Iowa, New Jersey, and Washington. Goldfinches are found living in fields full of weeds, floodplains, cultivated areas, roadsides, orchards, and backyards. They range from the plains, mountains, the Great Lakes and Georgia.

A member of the finch family, adults average about 5 inches in length with the males and females differing in color. During the winter seasons, though, males look more like females. Typically, the males are bright yellow with a little longer bill and wings than the females. Being the nester, these female finches have a dull yellow color until breeding season when a female's plumage turns olive-green. With their average lifespan being about 3 to 6 years, they can be frequent and familiar visitors year after year.

The diet of the American goldfinches tends to be very strict. They are actually one of the strictest vegetarians in the bird world.

They birds eat seeds from many different plants, tree buds, berries, and bird food from feeders. The seeds they eat come from composite plants -- daisies, coneflower, sunflowers, aster, etc. -- grasses, and trees.

They are picky eaters and take a long time to adapt to new foods. Being picky eaters is a reason why they are one of the hardest birds to rehabilitate and raise in captivity.

Goldfinches mate late in the season when their primary foods are more abundant. Due to this late mating, goldfinches usually only raise one brood a year. Most nesting occurs throughout July, August and September.

**Campbell Vaughn:** Lawn irrigation can be tricky to get right. See these tips to help.

Usually, several males are attracted to one female bird. The most common behavior involves the male chasing after the female. These chases may last for 20 or more minutes and cover a large area.

The male and female American goldfinches travel together searching for suitable nest sites. The female goldfinch builds a nest made of twigs, rootlets, and plant stems, and usually 4 to 20 feet above ground.

The female softens the nest by adding soft thistle to the inner lining. The eggs, usually four to six and light blue in color, are incubated by the mother for about two weeks. When the mother is incubating the eggs, she will develop a brood patch (a skin patch without feathers) on her stomach to transfer heat to the eggs. During the incubation period, the females tend to be quite tame, refusing to leave their nest and eggs unless there is a major disruption. When the eggs hatch, the parents feed the nestlings for about 12 to 17 days before they fledge.

These birds are very active, and fly in distinct patterns and make distinct calls in flight. This draws attention to themselves. They are very sociable, and they often gather in flocks with other birds.

Plant some sunflowers under a birdfeeder and you may get lucky enough to have some American goldfinches come visit your yard.

