



**Upper Raritan Watershed Association**  
2121 Larger Crossroads – Bedminster – NJ 07921  
908.234.1852  
www.urwa.org

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## CREATURE FEATURE

The American Goldfinch



(*Carduelis tristis*)

The American Goldfinch is frequently seen in New Jersey, where it is designated as our State Bird. It is common in weedy fields, flood plains, orchards, early second growth forests and suburbia. The males, in their bright yellow summer plumage, are easy to identify, but the females are less so, with their muted yellow-brown coloring.

The American Goldfinch exhibits some unusual and interesting characteristics. It is the only member of the Family Fringillidae which molts in both the fall (to its winter plumage) and the spring (to its much more brightly colored plumage). It breeds very late in the year, compared to most other songbirds – this is probably related to the flowering of thistles, which are an important food source, and physiological effects related to its spring molt. In the Upper Raritan watershed, nest building usually begins in July, and most eggs (usually four to six per nest) are laid by mid-August. This late start to the breeding season means that all but the most experienced females produce only one brood each year. Chicks hatch 12 to 14 days after incubation, and fledge after about two weeks.

The American Goldfinch is almost exclusively granivorous, meaning that it primarily eats seeds. It grips the stems of plants while feeding, and uses its cone-shaped beak to remove seeds from the seedheads of thistles, sunflowers, dandelions and other flowering plants. Its preferred diet of seeds makes it relatively easy to attract the American Goldfinch to backyard birdfeeders, and its habit of feeding during daylight hours makes it a favorite of many bird watchers.

The American Goldfinch is a social bird, and can often be seen in small colonies during the summer months and in large flocks the rest of the year. To hear its call, [click here](#). It may interest you to know

that this recording was made by Randolph Scott Little and Arthur A. Allen – Randy is an URWA member who serves on our Natural Science Committee!

For more information about the American Goldfinch, go to one or more of these web sites:

[Cornell Lab of Ornithology “All About Birds”](#)

[NatureWorks from New Hampshire Public Television](#)

[WhatBird.com Field Guide to Birds of North America](#)