

feathers, plant down, and fur.

My own experience with these little finches began in early May of 2003, when I found a nest containing three recently dead young in a street corner bush in Dawson City. At the time I did not know what the birds were, but I was a little shocked to find the tiny chicks dead from exposure. I suppose, in retrospect, that something may have happened to one of the parents—dinner for a cat, perhaps. I was relieved to find an active nest in a tall conifer the next day that contained four mostly grown young. I photographed that brood and three other nests of the 31 I found that summer. Strangely, at least ten nests did not fledge any young, and whenever I came upon a nest with dead chicks or cold eggs, I felt rather sad for these mysterious little birds.

When I returned to Dawson City in 2004, I brought superior photographic equipment. I was very keen on getting redpoll shots because I knew how colourful their breeding plumage could be, and I thought a nest in a conifer would be visually stunning. I began searching in early May, based on my nesting data from the previous spring when I had found so many nesting pairs. I had absolutely no success as I searched and re-searched every possible area where they might be breeding. I was confounded because there had been so many birds in 2003 and now I wasn't even seeing any adults. Nevertheless, I kept combing every likely habitat for a nesting pair because I was sure I could find at least one nest.

What I didn't realize at the time was that Common Redpolls, as seed-eating birds, can be a bit irruptive in their choice of breeding areas from year to year. Their choice of habitat is largely due to seed abundance, which coincides with rearing and feeding up to five young per breeding pair. Thus, I had returned to Dawson in a year when the birds had decided to nest elsewhere, en masse.

Dauntless, I parted the branches of every spruce I saw within five miles of Dawson City, hoping to find some sign of nesting. This routine continued for four

long days until I decided to try my luck up Bonanza Creek Road, the site of the huge gold strike in 1896 that put Dawson City on the map. There were many scattered White Spruce trees among the willows and alders that lined the road, and they were the requisite height, about 10 to 25 feet tall.

It was late at night, but still light out, when I came across a 12-foot spruce tree that had a tiny nest in it about chest height. The nest was empty but freshly lined with soft cottony material and surrounded by a secure arrangement of twigs and rootlets. I knew that this was a redpoll nest and withdrew right away so as not to disturb any nearby birds. I felt more of a sense of relief than triumph as I returned home; it seemed I had found the proverbial needle in the haystack after four long days of searching.

Two days later, on May 14, I checked the nest again to find it contained one egg. Redpoll eggs are a teal colour with lavender splotches, and the most common clutch number in the North seems to be five. On May 15 the nest had two eggs, and when I returned for my check the following day, I was surprised to see the female on the nest. I dared not disturb her for fear that she might abandon the nest—a very real possibility during the egg-laying process. On May 17, I found her on the eggs again. When she left the nest I could see there were four eggs. I retreated at once to allow her to incubate as soon as possible, as spring evenings in Dawson can get quite cold.

I left the birds alone until May 26, when I knew there was a chance of the eggs hatching. Sure enough, when I parted the twigs to peer into the nest, I saw one naked pink baby and three eggs. I decided that an opportunity to capture the birds eating eggshells had presented itself, and I began my set-up immediately, taking care to disturb the brooding female as little as possible. She sat tight on the nest and regarded me with tiny black eyes while I put up my blind. I was able to begin shooting the birds by 4 P.M. with the help of an able assistant, fellow actor and photographer David James.



Initially, David and I got only shots of the brooding female, but David did manage to capture one image of the female eating the last eggshell the next day. I began my shift expecting to get only shots of the female brooding her four newly hatched young, but I was pleasantly surprised when the male flew in with a crop full of seeds taken from birch and alder catkins. He promptly regurgitated them and fed them to the female while she vibrated her wings in a begging gesture. She then fed them to the young beneath her. This whole process took perhaps 45 seconds, and I was able to get five great shots of both parents together. When I looked at them later that evening, I was amazed at the results. The colours of the birds against the hues of the spruce were fantastic, and both parents were caught in action.

We continued to shoot the birds feeding their young until May 30, when I arrived to find the four babies dead of exposure. I was perplexed yet again by their apparent fragility, and could only surmise that something might have happened to the female. As sad as my grisly discovery was, I

A brooding female redpoll flutters her wings in anticipation of a feeding from her more colourful mate.