

Texas Goldfinches  
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Winter is a great time to put out bird feeders and this year, with a lot of us staying home more, there's even more incentive to have some fun with winter birds at your feeders. This winter we are getting a lot of goldfinches. The name comes from their bright yellow plumage in spring. During winter, however, they are much duller and we don't get to see them when they are bright yellow.

On the central and upper Texas coasts, the predominant goldfinch is the American Goldfinch. This species ranges over the entire state and can be seen at feeders with sunflower seed or nyjer. Goldfinches are one of the few songbirds that eat only seed (no insects) so that explains why they are so common at feeders.

In winter, both sexes are a drab yellow or even brown color with dull black wings that have white markings on them. American Goldfinches breed much later than most birds do because they wait until June or July when the thistles are blooming. Because of that, they don't get their breeding plumage until later in the year and most have migrated out of Texas by the time that happens. So here in Texas, we miss the beautiful yellow male with jet black wings and a black cap.

In the western parts of the state, we have another goldfinch entirely, the Lesser Goldfinch. It is a shame that this beautiful bird has lesser in its name for it is every bit as handsome as the American. It is a bit smaller though and has a much smaller range, so I guess lesser it is. The male of this goldfinch is also bright yellow but in Texas the back is black.

In breeding plumage, a male Lesser Goldfinch could never be mistaken for a male American Goldfinch. In the western part of their range (California), the back of the male is green but we don't have to worry about that here! The females on the other hand can be a bit tricky. The easiest way to tell them apart is to look at the undertail coverts. A female American Goldfinch has a white undertail and a Lesser has a yellow undertail. There are other differences such as the bill color. American is pinkish and Lesser is gray, but the rest are pretty subtle so we'll just concentrate on those two.

Why do we birders need to concentrate on them? Well it's possible that hiding among the hordes of American Goldfinches at your feeders is a Lesser Goldfinch. They are rare in the eastern part of the state but in a winter like this, where odd birds are showing up everywhere, it would not be that surprising to find one where it shouldn't be. Lesser Goldfinches have turned up in Alabama and Iowa this winter so why not the eastern part of Texas? At our house in Lake Jackson, we had a male Lesser Goldfinch spend two winters with us a few years back. He was quite a treat to see! So while you're enjoying the birds at your feeder, keep an eye out for a sneaky Lesser Goldfinch.

Photo Caption: American Goldfinches are one of the few songbirds that eat only seeds and not insects.

Photo by Susan Heath.