

FINNSTICKS: BIRDING FINNISH STYLE

KAREN L. WIEBE, Biology Department, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon SK S7N 5E2

History

According to recent surveys, Finland has more birders per capita than any country except Great Britain. Soon after arriving in Finland in January, 1996, I found a local group of birders to join during weekend field trips. One of my first outings was to Hanko, a peninsula that juts into the Baltic Sea from southern Finland, analogous to Canada's Point Pelee. It was here that I was first introduced to the finnstick. Looking outward over the Baltic was a birder with his binoculars balanced strangely on the end of a small pole. I jabbed my Finnish birding companion in the ribs "Must be some crazy Brit," I commented. "Actually, that's a very useful Finnish invention," Seppo replied proudly. "You should try it!"

I learned that the finnstick has two major functions: 1) to reduce the vibrations while looking through binoculars and 2) to allow the arms and hands to rest while holding binoculars for extended periods. With the stick, one can watch birds intensively for several hours without discomfort (Fig. 1). Though not very useful for warbler-watching in forests, finnsticks are great for scanning open areas such as prairies, lakes or ocean shores. In fact, many Finnish birders prefer binoculars and finnsticks over spotting scopes when conducting waterbird surveys during migration; binoculars offer a wider field of view and make it easier to track flying birds.

There seem to be many fanatical migration-watchers in Finland. Even in



Figure 1. Method of using a finnstick as illustrated by Matti Koivula. Cartoon appeared in "Ornimisen sietämätön keveys" and is reproduced with permission.

the coldest weather, bird towers were crammed with people who spend hours (or days) up there hugging their thermoses of coffee. News of a rare bird was spread rapidly by an electronic pager system, and most serious birders wore pagers on their belts. The Finnish name for the stick, *staijikeppi*, (migration-watching stick) reflects its popularity for watching migrating birds. However, this *monikäyttösine* (all-purpose object) comes in handy for many other functions such as swatting mosquitoes, scratching your back, or clearing vegetation. The wooden pole of my own finnstick is cracked after having beaten it against a tree trunk to scare a black bear away from my students!

The finnstick is not a new invention, but is something not often seen among North American birders. First used in Finland around 1968, it is now common there and many serious birders own one. For more details about their history and development, see an article in the Finnish birding journal *Alula* 1/1996 (in Finnish and English), and another article in *Birding* 25: 264-5.

Making Finnsticks

No two sticks are alike because there is no commercial supplier. To make one requires a little time but is not difficult or expensive. The simplest sticks are made from a single piece of carved wood; others are made of two parts: a small wooden block whittled to fit the underside of one's binoculars and a pole about 3/4 m long. Usually the whittled base is carved of some hardwood such as oak which is durable, but softer woods like pine are not uncommon. The trick is to get the right shape to support your binoculars securely (Fig. 2). You may need to take into account the distance between your eyes, i.e., the normal position of your binoculars when you use them. The length of the pole

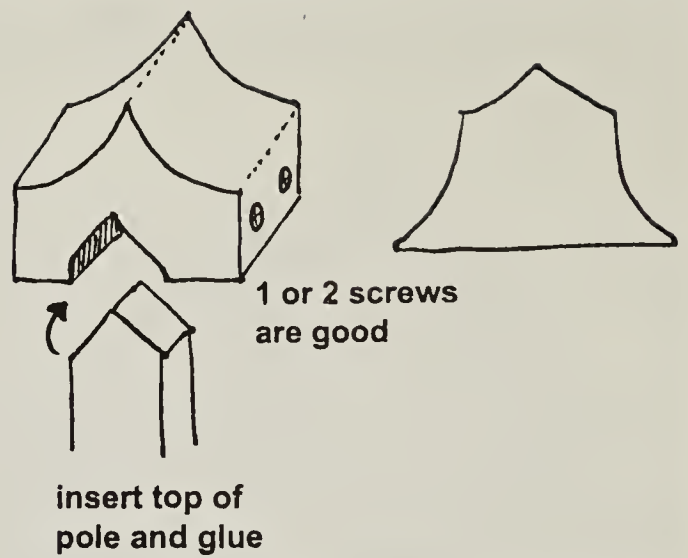


Figure 2. Two examples of wooden blocks in side profile carved to fit under binoculars. The length of the block, the dotted line, never extends past the barrel of the binoculars. A simple way to attach the pole is shown; those with woodworking expertise may want to attempt more elegant variations.

varies according to individual preference. Most end at the chest, or stomach, but cut it a little long at first and trim it later for maximum comfort. Poles are usually glued and/or screwed to the block, but duct tape does in a pinch!

During my year in Finland, I noticed many creative and artistic variations on the theme. The "pole" was often an old hockey stick - a quintessential symbol of Finnish (as well as Canadian) culture. Some were carved from a single beautiful piece of polished and knotted maple, others were carved from an old canoe paddle or even made from materials like plastic or metal (don't lick the metal ones in winter). One had the pole-section constructed from an old collapsible tripod-leg so it could fold neatly into a backpack. A few competitive birders, in the fashion of the Red Baron, marked their pole with "lifer-notches" to commemorate past exploits.

When using the finnstick, always keep the binocular strap around your neck to

prevent them from falling off accidentally. Rarely, I observed binoculars tied directly to sticks with strings or rubber bands so that the birder could quickly drop his/her arms to use a scope while leaving the whole binocular-stick complex dangling from the neck. So,

why not try making a stick of your own? It's fun to personalize your own functional creation. Especially for people without, or unwilling to carry, heavy scopes and tripods, finnsticks greatly increase your endurance and view in open habitats.



DIARY OF HOUSE FINCHES IN SOUTHWESTERN SASKATCHEWAN

BRENDA AND JOHN FLOOD, Box 475, Leader, SK S0N 1H0
e-mail: hiwater@sk.sympatico.ca

We moved to Leader from Calgary in June 1990. The first things out of the moving truck were, of course, our bird feeders.

We were delighted when the first male House Finch arrived at our feeders on April 23, 1995. The bright red male was observed again on April 25. The next time we saw a House Finch was a year later, when a red male visited our feeders each day from April 9 to April 11. On April 22, we observed two male House Finches that were orange variants, clearly different from the one we had seen earlier. We saw the first female House Finch on May 20, and again on May 29 and June 3.

The following year, on April 6, 1997, we again observed a red male House Finch at our feeders and a male and female pair together on April 19. A female was seen again on May 28. In 1998, four red male House Finches visited the feeders on April 3. A female was seen on May 5 and 6, and a red male on May 7. Our first fall visitors were a red male on October 8, 9, 11 and 12, and a female on October 23.

In 1999, a year with a significant increase in the number at our feeders, House Finches arrived in March and stayed right through the winter. The first arrivals were a red male on March 23 and a female on March 28. April 28 brought an orange variant male. Pairs were feeding each other on April 24 and on May 10. We consistently observed two red males, plus one orange variant, and two females throughout the entire spring and summer months. We surmise that the House Finches nested successfully in the area.

During the fall, from September through October, three females and two red males were observed. At least one pair visited the feeder regularly from November through March, with two males and one female on December 11 and 12.

The spring of 2000 brought even more House Finches. On April 6, there were two males and one female, and on April 10, three females and four red males. A red male was observed feeding a female on April 30 and May 2, and an adult feeding an immature was noted on