Notes

Two Song Types of the Pine Grosbeak

Ron Pittaway

The song of the Pine Grosbeak (*Pinicola enucleator*) is described in much of the literature (see Bent 1968, Farrand 1983, Clement et al. 1993) as being like that of a Purple Finch (*Carpodacus purpureus*). On 16 February 1998, I watched an adult male Pine Grosbeak singing for about 10 minutes around 1515h at the Leslie M. Frost Natural Resources Centre in Haliburton County, Ontario. The weather was mild for February (about freezing) and sunny with no wind. The male was perched about 25 metres up, near the top of a Northern Red Oak (*Quercus rubra)*, close to where several Pine Grosbeaks were eating sunflower seeds spread on the snow. It perched upright on the branch, once changing positions slightly. It sang almost continuously, with short pauses between songs. The song was similar to a Purple Finch's song, but slightly less loud, a little more varied, and long continued. I heard a shorter version of this song earlier in January 1998. This appears to be the "whisper singing" of Bent (1968) and Taylor (1979).

The function of this winter song is unknown. These Pine Grosbeaks were on winter range, long before the breeding season, and they also were outside their normal breeding range. In the mid 1970s, I kept an adult male Pine Grosbeak (with a wing injured by a car) for three years in Algonquin Provincial Park. It also sang a similar "whisper song" in winter, on many occasions. However, it also had another much different song that it sang for an hour or two at dawn in April, May and into June. This song was a loud, "twanging" warble, much louder and much shorter than the winter song. It began and ended abruptly, and was repeated at very short intervals. This song was unlike the song of the Purple Finch. The season of this second song suggests that it is the territorial and breeding song. I believe that the two different songs described above are confused in much of the literature.

In summary, the Pine Grosbeak has two song types: a "whisper song" that is reminiscent of a Purple Finch's song and is sung in winter, and a much louder territorial song that is sung during the breeding season.

Acknowledgements
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PRODUCT NOTICE

The Large Gulls of North America. 1997. The Advanced Birding Video Series(ABVS). Video Number 1. A Peregrine Video Production. $34.95 US plus $3.85 shipping. Visa and Mastercard accepted. Available from producer John Vanderpoel, phone toll free 1-888-893-2287 (ABVS) or e-mail <jvanderp@peregrinevideo.com> or visit website <http://www.peregrinevideo.com>.

This fabulous 119 minute video is jammed full of identification tips; even the experts will learn many new field marks. Narrated by Jon Dunn, the script was written by Larry Rosche and Jon Dunn with input from North American and Eurasian authorities on gulls. The video covers 13 species of large gulls: Herring, California, Great Black-backed, Lesser Black-backed, Yellow-legged, Western, Yellow-footed, Kelp, Glaucous-winged, Glaucous, Iceland, Thayer's and Slaty-backed. Subspecies (races) and several hybrids are also shown and discussed.

The introduction outlines gull topography, structure, plumage terminology and ageing characteristics. Most large gulls acquire their first adult winter plumage in their fourth year when they are about three and a half years old. For most species in the video, the juvenile, first winter, second winter, third winter, adult winter and adult breeding/summer plumages are shown and discussed. However, not all first, second and third summer plumages are shown. Timing of molts is mentioned for many species. Key identification features of each species are highlighted using arrows, stop action and split screen comparison shots of similar species in flight, perched and swimming. A video locator card allows you to fast forward and quickly find a particular species. The film quality is excellent.

Gulls are one of the most fascinating and challenging groups of birds in the world. The Large Gulls of North America video is the most important contribution to our knowledge of gull identification and ageing since the publication of Peter Grant's classic guide on gulls. This video is highly recommended.

White-winged Crossbills Foraging on Wood

Bill Crins and Doug McRae

The feeding ecology of crossbills has been studied extensively. They are best known for their ability to extract seeds from between the scales of conifer cones with their modified bills [in the case of White-winged Crossbills (*Loxia leucoptera*), especially from spruces (*Picea* spp.) and Eastern Larch (*Larix laricina*)]. They are known to eat the seeds of certain deciduous trees and shrubs, and herbs, as well as various insects (Benkman 1992, Terres 1982). The attraction to mineral sources (particularly sodium and calcium) by Red Crossbills (*Loxia curvirostra*) also is well documented (Tozer 1994). White-winged Crossbills also are attracted to mineral sources, particularly road salt (Benkman 1992, Terres 1982), but this behaviour is less fully documented in this species.

On 4 January 1997, the authors observed White-winged Crossbills engaged in peculiar foraging behaviour. A group of about 30 crossbills was observed visiting dead, decomposing coniferous tree snags [Black Spruce (*Picea mariana*) and Eastern Larch] along the edge of a low, open conifer swamp bordering Highway 60, near the East Gate, in Algonquin Provincial Park. The foraging or excavation was occurring well above water or ground level (1 to 10 m above snow level). When engaged in this activity, the crossbills could be approached quite closely, to within 10 m or so. In fact, the birds seemed to be reluctant to leave these snags. Most of the activity was focused on two or three of the snags. In order to ascertain the attraction of these snags, we approached one of them, and found that there were numerous small wood fragments and chips over the surface of the snow below the snag. We also examined the freshly worked wood, but found no evidence of visible mineral deposits, nor of insects, fungi, or other visible organisms that might have been serving as a food source. Nevertheless, as soon as we moved a short distance away from this snag, the crossbills returned to it to continue working at the wood.

After mentioning our observation to others, Ron Tozer (pers. comm.) reported that he and Doug Tozer had made a similar observation in the Cache Lake marsh, also in Algonquin Provincial Park, on 19 February 1995. On that occasion, they observed four White-winged Crossbills (3 males, 1 female) apparently eating wood from a very soft, rotting stump about 1 m high. The stump was riddled with insect tunnels, but the crossbills apparently were eating the soft, exposed,

inner wood, which was removed with the tongue, while holding the bill open widely. In their observation, the crossbills also allowed close approach, to within about 2 m. Tozer (1994) also has observed Red Crossbills crawling over, and probing in the crevices of, a small stump that may have been previously submerged in muddy, roadside (mineral-rich?) water.

Benkman (1992) and Manville (1941) have noted that this behaviour has been observed in White-winged Crossbills, which have been seen clambering about on, and probing into, the bark and lichens on the trunks of trees. A possible explanation for similar behaviour observed in the Parrot Crossbill (*Loxia pytyopsittacus*) in Finland was proposed by Pulliainen et al. (1978). Analyses of wood from decaying logs on which Parrot Crossbills were feeding revealed that the outermost surfaces of those logs were rich in ash and calcium. Thus, crossbills appear to be attracted to mineral sources of various types, and this may provide a reasonable explanation for the observations reported in this note.

Acknowledgements

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