

# Pine Grosbeaks Using Bird Feeders

by  
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## Introduction

The Pine Grosbeak (*Pinicola enucleator*) staged a major movement into southern Ontario during the winter of 1985–86 (Weir 1986). An unusual aspect of Pine Grosbeak behaviour in that winter was the species' widespread use of bird feeders (Weir 1986).

## Observations

I first noted Pine Grosbeaks eating sunflower seeds at a feeder on 5 January 1986. Throughout that winter, small flocks of Pine Grosbeaks, of up to a dozen individuals, regularly visited by feeder in Minden and many other feeders (pers. obs.) in Haliburton Co., Ontario. My last observation in 1986 was of two females at my feeder on 28 March. At feeders, Pine Grosbeaks were often dominated by the more aggressive Evening Grosbeaks (*Coccothraustes vespertinus*). They tended to frequent feeders more at midday after the Evening Grosbeaks had left. In 1986, Ron Tozer (pers. comm.) made his first observations of Pine Grosbeaks at feeders in the District Municipality of Muskoka. On one occasion at Dwight, he

observed six Pine Grosbeaks aggressively fighting with several Evening Grosbeaks over sunflower seeds.

These observations are noteworthy because in over 30 years I have only once before observed Pine Grosbeaks at a bird feeder (in January 1984, when I observed a small flock at a feeder near Haliburton Village, Haliburton Co.), although there have been many "irruptions" of this species in southern Ontario during that time (Speirs 1985). Crumb (1981) reported a female Pine Grosbeak at her feeder in upstate New York. She concluded, "although I have discussed this with many people over the years, I have never known of anyone who knew of a Pine Grosbeak actually eating at a feeder." As a result of her note, Dorothy Crumb (pers. comm.) learned from Kim Eckert (*in litt.*) of Duluth, that "Pine Grosbeaks routinely eat sunflower seeds at Minnesota feeders." Pine Grosbeaks also have been reported to use feeders in Nova Scotia (Tufts 1961).

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## Discussion

Why Pine Grosbeaks have not until recently been observed to use feeders in southern Ontario and upstate New York, but have elsewhere, is not known. I offer three (probably interrelated) possible explanations.

First, Newton (1972) stated that food habits of cardueline finches are learned from conspecifics and by trial and error. Thus, the use of feeding stations by Pine Grosbeaks appears to be a learned behaviour. Since most of the Pine Grosbeaks that visit southern Ontario breed in remote areas where there are few feeders, their infrequent irruptions may mean that some populations have not learned to use feeders.

Second, Pine Grosbeaks feed extensively on tree buds (Newton 1972), and so they may not be as dependent on feeders as are other winter finches when tree seeds and berries are at low levels. However, their appearance at feeders in 1986 may have been due to the failure of an important unrecognized food source. Weir (1986) attributed their use of feeders to "a shortage of wild seeds and berries".

Third, Tufts (1961) believed that increasing numbers of Evening Grosbeaks caused a decline in the use of feeders by Pine Grosbeaks in Nova Scotia. Therefore, Pine Grosbeaks may not go to feeders in southern Ontario and New York State because of the presence at those feeders of large numbers of more aggressive species such as Blue Jays (*Cyanocitta cristata*) and

Evening Grosbeaks. However, when a large irruption of Pine Grosbeaks occurs, there may be sufficient numbers present that some individuals seek out additional food sources such as feeders. Only small numbers may actually go to feeders, and these may be the more aggressive individuals that are ready to compete with other birds. Pine Grosbeaks using feeders could be rare in southern Ontario and New York State because those areas do not often have large numbers of this species. Perhaps they do go to feeders more frequently in Minnesota because that state usually has higher numbers of Pine Grosbeaks in winter than do southern Ontario and New York. Therefore, Minnesota more frequently has Pine Grosbeaks that are habituated to feeders.

There may be better explanations of these observations. Please contact me if you have a different interpretation.

## Epilogue

In January 1988 I observed one to three Pine Grosbeaks several times at the feeders of the Leslie M. Frost Natural Resources Centre, Haliburton Co. The observation of Pine Grosbeaks at feeders would have been considered exceptional before 1986. It will be interesting to see if the use of bird feeders by Pine Grosbeaks in southern Ontario increases in future years.

### Acknowledgements

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### Literature cited

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## Notes

### Ross' Goose Breeding on Akimiski Island, Northwest Territories

During part of July 1984, Peter Burke and the author were participating in the *Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas* project in northern Ontario. Part of our assignment included assisting the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources staff with a goose banding program.

On 13 July 1984 we were involved in gathering wild geese into pens as part of this project. One flock of Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*) was being "rounded up" on the northwest shoreline of Akimiski Island, Northwest Territories. Included in the flock of approximately 50 geese were several Canadas, two or three Snow Geese (*Chen caerulescens*), one "Blue" Goose, and an adult male and two juvenile Ross' Geese (*Chen rossii*).

Photographs of the adult male Ross' and the goslings (Figs. 1 and 2) were obtained both in the hand and in the pens. The adult did not appear to be a hybrid and exhibited features one would expect in a "pure" Ross'. The juveniles were similar to young Snow Geese, but differed in that they were much whiter in appearance. No notable difference was found in bill structure between them and young Snow Geese. They were, however, much more aggressive than the young Snow Geese while in the pens.

Photographs were submitted to the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, for evaluation. The impression of the reviewers was that the birds were likely pure juvenile Ross' Geese, but the possibility of hybridization could not be ruled out definitively.