

Massachusetts often consists of white or pitch pines, cedar swamps, bogs, and cedar and tamarack thickets. They have a wide variety of calls and whistles, but the most familiar is their territorial song—the incessantly whistled *Toot-toot-toot-toot*, about two notes per second, heard most frequently in winter and early spring. Courtship displays include circling flights by males, complex bobbings and shufflings, and courtship feeding by the male.

The nest is usually an abandoned woodpecker hole, but the birds occasionally nest in natural cavities or nest boxes. The nest is usually without lining except for scattered feathers. A nesting bird will usually pop into view in the nest hole if the nest tree is tapped. The usual clutch is five or six oval to nearly round white eggs. Both birds incubate and brood, but the female apparently does most of these duties. Incubation lasts about four weeks, and the young birds fledge in four to five weeks. Incubation begins with the first egg; thus, hatching is asynchronous, producing a brood in which the young may be of very different sizes. This may have evolved as a reproductive strategy that facilitates raising large numbers of young in years of high food supply and reducing the brood size by starvation in lean years.

Saw-whets are largely nocturnal foragers, with most activity in the early evening and before dawn, although they have been reported foraging on cloudy days. They have the usual owl adaptation of serrated first primary wing feathers, which disrupt smooth air flow and thus reduce vortex noise. These silent predators also possess very differently shaped ears that allow them to pinpoint the location of prey by sound. Their chief prey items are mice, voles, and shrews, but they occasionally take bats, frogs, birds, and insects. They may hunt over a territory of nearly half a square mile. They eject pellets of fur or feathers and bone, usually one per prey item.

Northern Saw-whet Owls have a long history of showing up in unexpected places, such as people's houses, walking or flying into tents, or landing on people's hats or shoulders. These and other rather bizarre behaviors only add to their reputation as irresistibly charming little owls.

W.E. Davis, Jr.

### ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

Julie Zickefoose is a freelance artist, writer, and naturalist who is devoted to the study, conservation, and appreciation of birds. She worked as a field biologist for The Nature Conservancy for six years before turning to art as a full-time career. Julie's drawings have been published in *The New Yorker*, and she has painted, drawn, and written for *Bird Watcher's Digest*, *American Birds*, *Bird Observer*, *Ladybug Magazine*, and numerous publications of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Exhibitions include one-woman shows at Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology, the Cornell Laboratory of

Ornithology, the Memorial University of Newfoundland, and the XIX International Ornithological Congress in Ottawa. Awards include a Radcliffe Traveling Fellowship to paint birds of Amazonian Brazil, and International Council for Bird Preservation and Sigma Xi stipends. Julie can be reached at Indigo Hill, Route 1, Box 270, Whipple, OH 45788.

## AT A GLANCE *October 1994* \_\_\_\_\_ *Wayne R. Petersen*

The mystery photo for October actually includes several birds. However, the largest of the several pictured birds is the intended mystery bird; the smaller, streaked individuals are Purple Finches. This knowledge provides a clue because it gives the reader a size comparison, seldom enjoyed on this page, of characteristically ambiguous photographs.

The mystery bird's obviously robust size and its thick, conical, seed-cracking bill suggest that it is probably a member of either the Subfamily Cardinalinae or the Family Fringillidae. The first of these two groups includes cardinals, grosbeaks, and allies, while the other comprises finches and allies. Knowing that many of the Fringillids are typically small and short-tailed (e.g., redpolls and siskins) or lack an obvious eyebrow stripe (e.g., Pine Grosbeak), the only possible candidate in this group is the Evening Grosbeak. Although the male Evening Grosbeak has a yellow eyebrow stripe and forehead, it also has an extensive white wing patch, not white wing bars, and does not have a streaked back.

By elimination, it would appear that the hefty seed-eater in the photograph must be a member of the Cardinalinae. Because the bird does not have a crest and possesses wing bars, it cannot be a Northern Cardinal, while its large size compared with that of the adjacent Purple Finches removes the Dickcissel and all of the buntings as possibilities. This leaves only the three species of grosbeaks that have occurred in Massachusetts.

The prominent white wing bars and the bold eyebrow stripe at once leave the Blue Grosbeak out of the running. Because the bird does not show a solid black head and upper chest, it cannot be an adult male Rose-breasted Grosbeak, while a female of that species would be heavily streaked on the breast and flanks. Instead, the relatively unstreaked underparts, especially across the midbreast, and the blackness of the primaries all clearly indicate that the pictured bird is an immature male Black-headed Grosbeak (*Pheucticus melanocephalus*) in its first autumn plumage.

In Massachusetts the Black-headed Grosbeak is a rare visitor from the West that most often appears in fall and winter and occasionally visits feeding stations, such as the bird pictured in the October issue is doing.