

Part II

EVENING GROSBEAKS AT SOUTH LONDONDERRY, VERMONT,
1954 AND 1955

By Elizabeth Holt Downs

As far as can be ascertained, the Evening Grosbeak was unknown in Londonderry until 1951. From then until the winter of 1953-54, it was a rare winter visitor, appearing singly or in small flocks. It was surprising, therefore, to have them breed in Londonderry in 1953.

Londonderry is located in the central part of southern Vermont. It has two villages and a population of less than a thousand. Lumbering and dairy farming are the principal industries, although in recent years, many of the farms have been bought for summer homes and are gradually reverting to woodland. Glebe Mountain, on the western slope of which we live, has an altitude of 2,944 feet and is almost entirely a mixed woodland with conifers predominating.

In 1954, the spring build-up of our Evening Grosbeak population began during the second week in March. From then until April 20th approximately 100 grosbeaks were seen daily. On April 8th a male grosbeak was observed feeding tree buds to a female. And on the following day a male was seen "dancing" in front of a female. From then until the juvenals were brought to our feeding station, such dancing and feeding were observed daily. During April these attentions seemed to be offered and accepted indiscriminately. More often than not it was the female that took the feeding initiative, swinging her body with tail spread in front of a male until she was fed.

The first food fed to the females was sugar maple buds. These were followed by elm and cherry buds and later sunflower seeds. In addition to tree buds and seeds, the females were fed salt-impregnated earth. The Evening Grosbeak seems to require salt in its diet as we have observed them eating salty earth during every month of the year.

During April the grosbeaks did a great deal of chasing each other in and around trees. Nor did they confine such attentions to their own species but also chased after Blue Jays, Phoebes, Robins, Cowbirds and Hairy Woodpeckers.

By the first of May the number of Evening Grosbeaks had dwindled to about 50. Around the middle of May there were some indications of pairing and on May 23rd a female was observed gathering what looked to be very fine straw. When her mouth was full she flew to a near-by tree where a male was perched and together they flew in a northerly direction. By the end of May, the grosbeaks came daily but irregularly to our feeders often eating as late as 5 or 6 P.M.* Dancing by the males and the feeding of the females were observed daily.

The grosbeaks followed this same pattern of behavior during June. There was, however, less feeding of sunflower seeds to the females than had been done in 1953. On June 25th, the grosbeaks ate until after 7 P.M. And on the morning of the 26th, the young grosbeaks were brought to the trees near the feeders while the parent grosbeaks

*All times of day are expressed in Eastern Standard Time.

flew from feeder to trees all day carrying sunflower seeds to their young. Some of the juvenals were more active than others and hopped around in the trees and sometimes to the ground. There was constant calling by the parent grosbeaks and juvenals. We were never able to detect any difference in the calls of the juvenals but it was apparent that the parent grosbeaks could and did.

Within a few days after their arrival here, some of the young grosbeaks followed their parents to the feeders and were fed there. Some even attempted to do a little eating on their own. Evening Grosbeaks appear to be very attentive parents with both sexes sharing the feeding responsibility. On July 8th we trapped an adult female and with no apparent concern about her own situation, she fed a juvenal through the wire mesh of the trap. For the next two weeks, the grosbeaks arrived here early and stayed late. The young grosbeaks continued to be fed by the adults but such feeding gradually lessened so that by the end of July most of the juvenals were on their own. However, a juvenal was observed being fed by an adult on August 1st and 2nd.

On July 2nd we found a young male with an injured wing on our lawn. As he was unable to fly we placed him in a cage beneath a tree. An hour or so later an adult male tried to get to him so we released the juvenal on the lawn where he was fed once by the male. In the hope that his parents would continue to feed him, we erected a low fence on the lawn and put him in the enclosed area. But no adult approached him for the rest of that day so we fed him. On the two following days an adult male fed the injured juvenal once each day with sunflower seeds and water. After that no adult grosbeak offered him any attention.

The young grosbeak was very easy to feed, accepting readily everything we gave him. On the 4th day of his captivity he began to crack sunflower seeds and eat them. He also caught insects. By the end of two weeks he was able to take care of his own dietary wants although he was always ready and eager to accept an Alpine strawberry from our hands. Every day he practiced using his injured wing. At first he was only able to move it a little but within a few days he could flutter it feebly. By climbing up the side of his fence and jumping to the ground he practiced making landings. He did this a good part of each day and after eight days he was able to fly about a foot in height.

This injured juvenal was quite tame but more so in the house than outside where we found it advisable to approach him directly and never to cast a shadow on him as that seemed to frighten him. At night when his cage was brought to him, he very willingly hopped into it unassisted. On June 18th a Sharp-shinned Hawk was seen close to our house several times during the day. Whether because of the hawk or for some other reason the injured grosbeak was reluctant to enter his cage that night and on the night of the 19th, instead of hopping into the cage, he flew high into a near-by tree. He was still there the next morning at 4 A.M. and later, when the other grosbeaks had arrived, several juvenals were observed pecking and trying to chase the injured grosbeak. But he stood his ground and pecked back and in a very short while the other juvenals left him.

From then until September 6th, the injured grosbeak was here all

day and every day. When we trapped him while banding he showed no fear of the trap but spent his time there eating and when released he did not hurry away but frequently entered another trap to continue his eating. After September 6th he was seen no more.

By the end of July some of the adult grosbeaks were noticeably molting and fewer adults visited the feeders. However, a few adults were observed daily until early September. They spent less time in the feeders and more time in the trees or on the road eating salt-impregnated earth. On September 8th, both adults and juvenals spent a good part of the day catching insects after the manner of flycatchers. The adult grosbeaks had been observed doing this in May but not to the same extent.

The young grosbeaks continued their daily visits to the feeders and baths throughout August and September although in September they came less regularly and for shorter periods of time. During October and a part of November, they came less frequently, sometimes absenting themselves for two, three and four days and once for an interval of six days. When present they spent almost no time in the feeders but remained perched in near-by trees preening and calling. By the third week in November, the grosbeaks resumed their daily visits to our feeders.

We were never certain as to the number of Evening Grosbeaks that nested in this vicinity. No banding had been attempted in June. In July, 15 adults (seven males and eight females) and 21 juvenals (seven males and 14 females) had been banded. In addition there had been four juvenal casualties, killed by flying into windows, etc. So the number of known juvenals in July was 25 (nine males and 16 females). Two adults (one male and one female) and 40 juvenals (21 males and 19 females) were banded in August. The adult female was banded on August 27th and had red streaks on her beak as if she had been eating fruit.

The 1955 spring build-up did not begin until almost a month later than it had in 1954. It was not until April 17th that as many as 40-odd grosbeaks were seen at any one time. Within four days their number increased to a possible 100 but immediately declined to around 50. The sex ratio remained predominantly male. As in 1954, March and April of 1955 were "open" months — that is, the roads were bare with water running in the ditches and patches of ground showed in the fields around.

The first courting was observed on April 2nd when a male fed tree buds to a female. Later in the month salty earth was offered in addition to tree buds. But such feedings were observed only a few times during the month and at no time was any "dancing" witnessed.

During the first part of May the grosbeaks continued to show very little interest in the opposite sex. On May 13th the first dancing was observed and a female was seen gathering dried grass roots (presumably *Agropyron repens*) from sods that had been turned upside down. No male was seen in attendance. Toward the end of May some of the grosbeaks came to the feeders in pairs but as many as four males fed together with no females present. Dancing and feeding of females were only occasionally observed.

Unfortunately circumstances made it impossible to make detailed observations during most of June. It can be stated, however, that some grosbeaks were seen in the feeders daily. Sometimes they came in pairs, sometimes singly and almost always silently. After the 15th of June they frequently ate as late as 8 P. M. or later.

On June 23rd, 24th and 25th and the morning of the 26th, there was a great deal of human activity near the feeders including the banding of seven adult grosbeaks. No young grosbeaks appeared on the morning of the 26th as had occurred in 1953 and 1954. But on that afternoon with only two humans quietly present, two juvenals were observed being fed by an adult female in a near-by tree. Also witnessed was the dancing of a male in front of a female. The next day and from then on, more juvenals were brought to the trees around and fed sunflower seeds. However, there were noticeably fewer juvenals than had been observed in the previous two years and they were brought to trees a little further away from the feeders than in the other years. Contrary to our 1954 observations most of the feeding of the young in 1955 was done by the female parent.

On July 5th an adult female was seen selectively gathering dry hay along the road in front of our house. Although she seemed to have gathered as much as she could carry she hopped out of sight while still examining each piece of hay in the road.

There were fewer than usual of all kinds of birds in and around our feeders in July. This was undoubtedly due in part to the fact that we had two very active children visiting us at that time. But some grosbeaks were seen daily and dancing was observed on three different days but the feeding of an adult female only once.

The grosbeaks continued to visit our feeders and baths daily in August but after the first week there were noticeably fewer adults. Also neither adults nor juvenals remained for any length of time around our house after they had fed. An adult male and female were observed eating salty earth in front of our house as late as August 26th. And an occasional adult came to our feeders during September. On September 11th and again on the 15th, the grosbeaks were seen in near-by trees catching and eating flying insects. On September 20th an adult male tried a black cherry but apparently it was not to his liking as he ate only one.

During the latter half of September the juvenals came less frequently to the feeders and were away from here for longer periods of time each day. In October they rarely ate in the feeders but perched in near-by trees preening and calling. They also spent some of their time here eating salty earth in the road. They were not seen daily during October but were absent for periods of from two to six days. On November 2nd (almost three weeks earlier than in 1954) the grosbeaks began again their daily visits to our feeders.

Both our sight observations and our banding records seem to indicate a less successful nesting or refusal on the part of the adults to bring their young to our feeding station in 1955. On June 25th and the morning of the 26th, seven adult Evening Grosbeaks were banded. Of these only two repeated later. In July we banded only one male adult and four juvenals (two males and two females). In August we banded one

adult male, one adult female and 12 juvenals (seven males and five females). A total of 16 juvenals in 1955 compared with 65 juvenals banded in 1954.

159 Elm St., Northampton, Mass.; Glebe Farm, South Londonderry, Vt.

BANDING BLACKBIRDS IN A RICE FIELD RESERVOIR ROOST

By Brooke Meanley

In a recent paper by Neff and Meanley (Experiences in Banding Blackbirds in Eastern Arkansas, 1952, *Bird-Banding*, **23**:154-157) methods of obtaining blackbirds in roosts for banding purposes were described in some detail.

During the winter of 1953-1954 the night banding of blackbirds in the Arkansas rice fields area was continued by Mr. and Mrs. Meanley, but local conditions at the roost necessitated a somewhat different method for obtaining birds. Blackbirds that had been roosting in a small canebreak (*Arundinaria gigantea*) two miles north of Stuttgart in early February 1954 moved, as the roosting population increased in size, from the canebreak to willows (*Salix nigra*) and buttonbushes (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*) in a near-by 20-acre reservoir. Such impoundments are one of several methods of furnishing water for the irrigation of rice fields.

The birds were totally inaccessible to a man on foot, so the idea of going into the reservoir to band birds from a rowboat was conceived.

The blackbirds were roosting from the water's surface to the tops of trees and bushes, which seldom exceeded 20 feet in height. Birds roosting in the lower branches frequently weighted the limbs down into the water and were themselves often standing in the water, sometimes with their underparts and tails beneath the surface. Those found to be roosting closest to and actually in the water generally were female redwings (*Agelaius phoeniceus*).

Frequently the roosting birds were so concentrated that it was possible to drift quietly among them and band in one position for several minutes. Four thousand birds were banded in 10 nights in late February and early March; and on the night of February 23, 925 male redwings were banded between 7:30 p.m. and 1 a.m. Males were selected for banding because their conspicuous plumage makes them better "risks" for band returns than the drab females. The accompanying photograph by Garner Allen, Stuttgart, Arkansas, newspaperman, illustrates the procedure.

When approached by headlight those birds which were disturbed would fly toward the light in utter confusion, into the bander's face, against his body (often with considerable force), and all over the boat, perching wherever they made contact. The bander frequently had as many as 10 or 15 birds clinging to him at one time.

On dark cloudy nights roosting birds were aroused from their perches only when a limb broke from their weight or when some unusual noise