

EVENING GROSBEEKS AT SOUTH LONDONDERRY, VERMONT: 1956

BY ELIZABETH HOLT DOWNS

Every year since 1953 Evening Grosbeaks (*Hesperiphona v. vespertina*) have been observed throughout the year at our feeding station in South Londonderry, Vermont. During the latter part of each September and the month of October they rarely came to the feeders but perched in nearby trees, calling and preening. Occasionally they absented themselves for a period of from two to six days. Some time in November they resumed their daily visits to our feeders.

Although our winter flocks of grosbeaks had always been rather small and relatively stable, this was not true of our flock during the winter of 1955-56. It was much larger and constantly changing in composition. The grosbeaks had returned to our feeders early in November, 1955. By the end of that month the flock had increased in size to over 75. Unfortunately we were unable to band during November and most of December, but that the composition of the flock was constantly changing was beyond doubt. Certain grosbeaks that we were able to recognize by peculiar markings or bandings disappeared but others must have joined our flock because its size did not diminish. Natural foods could not have been abundant because the grosbeaks swarmed into all of our feeders, arriving early in the morning and some of them not leaving until late afternoon. In addition to the sunflower seeds in our feeders, the grosbeaks also fed on the fruits of our multiflora rose hedge. And, as always, they consumed much salt-impregnated earth.

Our 1956 winter grosbeaks were very quarrelsome. Living as we do in the snow belt of Vermont, we have never had to concern ourselves with drinking water for the birds in winter. All of our wintering birds quench their thirst with snow. But the grosbeaks not only fought over the food in our feeders but also over which one was to consume a certain bit of snow although snow was never in short supply that winter.

Every winter our birds are harried by a Northern Shrike (*Lanius excubitor borealis*) and the winter of 1955-56 was no exception. In addition a red fox (*Vulus fulvus*) was frequently seen in the vicinity of our feeders. We began to band regularly in early January, but whether because of the shrike and fox or for some other reason, the Evening Grosbeaks were trap shy and remained so for the rest of the winter. Only their eagerness for our food enabled us to band as many of them as we did. From early January until the end of April we banded 312 Evening Grosbeaks. In addition to these, we trapped 6 that had been banded by us in previous years and 24 that had been banded by others elsewhere. Interestingly enough, although there were many females in the flock we trapped comparatively few of them. We have never been able to determine whether our inability to trap female grosbeaks in proportionate numbers (except during the breeding season) is due to the female's being more trap shy than the male or because the female is less aggressive and allows herself to be chased away from the traps by the male.

TABLE 1

Banding record of Evening Grosbeaks at Glebe Farm, South Londonderry, Vermont, for the year 1956, showing the increase in the number of females as the breeding season approached and the number of juvenals banded.

<u>Month</u>	<u>New Bandings</u>		<u>Foreign Retraps</u>		<u>Returns</u>		<u>Totals</u>
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	
January	71	24	6	1	2	0	104
February*	12	4	1	0	0	0	17
March	71	16	5	0	2	0	94
April	81	33	10	1	1	1	127
May	26	33	2	3	3	5	72
June**	1	6	0	0	1	1	9
July**	1 Ad.	2 Ad.	0	0	1	0	
	3 Juv.	1 Juv.					8
August	9 Juv.	5 Juv.	0	0	0	0	14
October	1 Juv.	0	0	0	0	0	1
	276	124	24	5	10	7	446

*We banded only four times in February.

**Because of nesting, we banded only twice in June and twice in July.

Since we are situated in a clearing of approximately 5 acres on the western slope of Glebe Mountain, I was able to watch the approach of the grosbeaks in the early mornings. Invariably their approach was the same. Groups of from 2 to 10 would fly in from various directions and perch in the top of a very tall elm tree. After some 50 had assembled there, the grosbeaks (a few at a time) would descend to a small tree near the feeders, remain perched there for awhile and then fly down into the feeders. The time required for the assembling and descent to the feeders was usually from 30 to 45 minutes.

During February the flock increased to over 100. In March our snowfalls were frequent and accumulative; but surprisingly enough our flock of grosbeaks dwindled to less than 75. With the lengthening of the days, the grosbeaks assembled still earlier in the mornings and a few fed as late as 4:20 P.M. (E.S.T.). The largest number always appeared in the early morning. Should anything occur to disperse them, only a portion of the flock would return and as the day wore on even that number dwindled to just a few.

By April 3rd we could count only 40 grosbeaks at any one time. They had begun to feed on tree buds and were later and slower to assemble in the tall elm tree in the mornings. During the first part of April the grosbeaks began "chasing" each other and on April 18th I witnessed the first courtship feeding. In accord with my experience in observing Evening Grosbeaks, the female initiated this first feeding by "flirting" her tail (a quick spreading and closing of the tail), bobbing her head and swinging her body slightly in front of a male. Some males do not respond at first to this invitation but in this instance the male fed the female sugar maple buds. Within a few days courtship feeding was a daily occurrence. On one occasion I watched a male grosbeak go through all the motions of feeding a female but without having any food to give her. (This I knew because the pair were perched in a dead tree and I had had them under observation for some time before this "feeding" took place).

Beginning with 1953 I have been able to observe much of the courtship behavior of the Evening Grosbeaks every year. Their courtship seems to follow a certain pattern with possibly some slight variations. It is initiated by the female asking to be fed. The first food she receives from the male is tree buds; later she is fed salt-impregnated earth and still later (after pair formation has taken place) the female is fed sunflower and tree seeds. After pair formation has occurred, more often than not it is the male who takes the initiative and offers the seeds to the female. At this time when the female accepts the food (or asks for it) she assumes a posture similar to that of the young begging to be fed (crest raised, body crouched slightly and wings fluttering). Some females swing their bodies from side to side and occasionally a female will "cry". But sometimes the feeding is accompanied by very little display by the female.

"Dancing" by the males usually begins shortly after the initial courtship feeding and before pair formation has taken place. When dancing, the male grosbeak faces the female. With crest raised, bill and tail pointed upwards, breast almost touching the ground and wings drooped but spread wide and vibrating, he slowly pivots back and forth. He does not sing while dancing. If he utters any sound at all, it is too low for me to hear.

Feeding of the females continues throughout the nesting period and does not cease (although it becomes less frequent) until after the young have been brought to our feeding station. (In 1953 the last such feeding was observed on August 4th and in 1955 on July 13th). Dancing by the males usually stops before the courtship feeding does. (In 1953 the last dancing occurred on July 22nd and in 1955 on July 5th. In 1954 and 1956 the last dancing was observed on the same day as the last feeding of the females). Both feeding and dancing activities seem to be an individual matter. All Evening Grosbeaks do some courtship feeding and dancing but some do more of one or the other than do other grosbeaks.

That some pairs of grosbeaks feel a greater attachment to each other is quite obvious to an observer. Frequently while banding we will trap one of a pair and while it is being banded the mate will remain in a tree close by constantly calling. On June 2, 1956, we trapped a female. Her mate remained just outside the trap until we approached and then, while we were taking her from the trap he darted at us and flew in small circles around our heads calling all the while. As soon as she was out of sight the male flew to a small tree nearby and continued to call. The moment we released the female she joined her mate and together they flew away.

In 1956 I saw the first courtship feeding on April 18th and the first dancing on May 4th. From May 4th until July 6th dancing was a daily occurrence. Our 1956 grosbeaks did considerably more dancing than the grosbeaks in previous years, but on the other hand, I observed much less courtship feeding. This may have been due to the lateness of our spring: tree seeds were not available at the time when such seeds are usually fed to the female. Some pair formation had taken place by the middle of May.

During the last week in May one incident occurred which deserves mention but for which I have no explanation. A female grosbeak bit off a twig about eight inches in length and immediately several males hopped close to her. She flew to the next tree whereupon the males followed, still remaining close to her. She dropped the twig and the males promptly lost interest in her.

On June 1st I witnessed two matings of Evening Grosbeaks. In the one instance the male danced in front of the female and then mounted her. The female seemed indifferent. The other mating, however, was a very elaborate ceremony. The pair, on the road in front of our house, faced each other. The male danced (but all his movements were more subdued than in the usual dance). The female quivered her wings (short, rapid movements with wings held close to her body) and held her tail high. Then still in this posture but with her breast thrust forward she hopped the few inches to the dancing male. I could not be certain that their breasts touched. She continued to dance. It looked as if they touched bills twice. He then mounted her.

The third mating that I observed in 1956 occurred on June 3rd and took place in one of our feeders. Unfortunately I happened on the scene too late to know whether or not copulation had been preceded by an elaborate ceremony.

Spring, 1956, was very late—particularly in our section of Vermont. With the trees slow to leaf out and insects very scarce, warblers and other insectivorous species were forced to the ground in their search for food. Our cold, wet and late spring was followed by a cool and moist summer. The nesting of many species in this vicinity was late and apparently not very successful. In addition, Sharp-shinned Hawks (*Accipiter striatus velox*) and an unidentified buteo hawk preyed upon our birds. The buteo hawk was seen several times carrying away a bird the size of a grosbeak.

From our banding records (see Table 1) and sight observations we knew that we had more than the usual number of adult Evening Grosbeaks present during the breeding season. Courtship activities had begun in April, but it was not until July 6th that the first juvenal grosbeak was brought to our feeding station (in previous years the first young grosbeaks had been brought here on June 26th). During the week that followed, a few more juvenals appeared, but only twice throughout the summer did we ever see more than two juvenals with parents and sometimes there was only one. Then on July 12th we banded a juvenal female that was not fully fledged. Many grosbeak parents were still feeding their young in the trees at the end of July—a time when in previous years most of the juvenals were on their own.

As late as August 3rd at least one pair of Evening Grosbeaks was coming to and going from our feeders with no young grosbeaks within sight or sound. This, too, was most unusual. During August fewer and fewer grosbeaks were in evidence but almost always there were just as many (if not more) adults as young grosbeaks. And then, on August 30th, an adult female brought two juvenals to the trees nearby and fed them with the sunflower seeds from our feeders. This she continued to do until September 12th. These young grosbeaks were last observed with their parent on September 20th.

Perhaps because of the late nesting, the young grosbeaks came daily (although often briefly) to our feeders until November. This was quite contrary to our previous experience when the grosbeaks appeared but refused our food during the latter part of each September and all of October. Only twice during November, 1956, were the grosbeaks seen in our feeders. On the second such occasion (November 22nd) an adult male and an immature grosbeak fed together in the same feeder. The immature male begged to be fed (in the usual juvenal manner) and the adult fed him once. Then they both flew away. From November until early February, 1957, the grosbeaks appeared irregularly—absenting themselves for a period of eight days in November and sixteen days during the first half of December.

Glebe Farm, South Londonderry, Vt.

A JUVENAL EVENING GROSBEAK APPEARS IN NORTHAMPTON, MASSACHUSETTS IN LATE OCTOBER 1957*

BY B. M. SHAUB

The early arrival of the Evening Grosbeak in Northampton, Massachusetts in the autumn of 1957 is unprecedented. The first birds noted in the city were observed by me on September 23rd. A few days later they were reported by a number of individuals in the city as well as from the vicinal villages and towns.

The first of the early arrivals to drop into our feeding station appeared on Saturday, October 26th, when 7 males and 1 female were observed. Among the males was a young bird which still retained most of his juvenal plumage, although clearly in the early stages of the post juvenal molt and obviously a bird of the year.

After discovering the presence of this young bird, it was decided to capture it if possible, to band it, examine it more carefully in the hand, and record the data obtained. Hence a drop door trap was selected and placed on the porch where the birds come to the feeders and where they can easily be observed from my study. The next day the Evening Grosbeaks did not appear; however on the 28th about 25 came to the feeders and to the trap. At one time 15 birds could have been captured but the desired individual was nowhere to be seen. About 3 P.M. the much looked-for juvenal arrived and entered the trap, which was sprung to capture not only the young bird but an adult male as well. The juvenal was therefore made available for study. Photographs were made in both color and black and white in order to record the color and physical appearance of our unusual guest.

*Contribution No. 20 from the Shaub Ornithological Research Station, 159 Elm Street, Northampton, Massachusetts.