

EVENING GROSBEAKS - VISITORS THAT CAME TO STAY

by Geoff Hogan, Charlottetown

It always surprises me when someone watching our winter bird feeding station for the first time exclaims... "What are those beautiful yellow birds?!" These people have never seen an Evening Grosbeak before and did not realize that we have such colourful birds on P.E.I., especially during the winter.

Evening Grosbeaks have been the most conspicuous visitors to our winter feeding station for many years. As many as 80 to 100 have arrived at one time, making the white birch tree appear to be covered with yellow leaves...in mid-winter? The male, with predominantly yellow plumage and contrasting black tail and wings (with prominent white patch), cannot be confused with any other bird this size. The male American Goldfinch in breeding plumage, is brighter and much smaller. The female grosbeak is attractive in tones of gray and olive with white markings on her black tail and wings. Both sexes, however, have the distinctive large conical beak, used to expertly open sunflower seeds, their favorite food at winter feeding stations.

These large finches originally were a western species but have extended their range into the east. They were first reported in Nova Scotia in 1913 but did not become regular visitors there until nearly 30 years later. P.E.I.'s first record came in January 1927 when several were observed in Souris. Scattered reports occurred thereafter; however the species did not become common until much later, and then only during the winter months. By the mid to late 1950's and certainly by the mid 1960's they were regular, if sporadic, visitors to many feeding stations. Since then they have been observed on the Island during the summer months as well and there is evidence that they have bred.

Travelling in flocks they generally appear in the vicinity of our feeding station by late November or December and quickly become established once sunflower seeds are provided. They appear almost daily thereafter, remaining until late spring when the snow has gone and the sunflower seed supply is much reduced. A few stragglers remain, each year it seems longer, so that by June or July I hope that a pair has established a territory in our neighbourhood. So far they haven't. For the summer months most of the flocks likely migrate further north to breed but some go the woodlands of P.E.I., thereby becoming a year-round addition to our avifauna.

While some people have described the throngs of Evening Grosbeaks as greedy bullies I find it somewhat satisfying to watch a bird that can stand up to a Starling. Indeed, these birds are nearly equally matched and I have watched contests on the feeder go either way. However, the Blue Jay, when he arrives, still rules the roost.

