

The Evening Grosbeak

BY SAMUEL SCOVILLE, JR.

THE Athenians marked special days with a white stone. Our calender-makers use red letters. There are better ways. Fringed gentian, rose-red and snow-white orchids, the song of a veery, the hidden treasure of a rare nest, wind-swept barrens, jade-green pools—there are many better markers for a day than a colored number. A bird from the north all dusky-gold and velvet-black and ivory-white will always mark for me the 29th of January, 1917.

It had been a hard month of wrangling days in superheated courts and brief-ridden nights. Through them all, however, there was the whisper of a little cabin in the heart of the pine-barrens and of two priceless days that fell between terms. At last the first of them dawned and by mid-morning I was following a path that zigzagged through thickets of scrub-oak to the cabin set in a grove of pitch-pines. Below me the crooked Rancocas wound its way back and forth like a brown snake. I slipped into some old clothes, and all the worry of the month fell off my shoulders and rolled down the bank and was drowned in the golden water. It was an absolutely silent winter day and as I walked for miles and miles through stretches of low green pines and past pools set in golden sphagnum moss with only the caw of a passing crow drifting down from the blue sky or the tiny notes of the Golden-crowned Kinglet to break the stillness, the silence seeped in bringing with it the comfort and peace of the wilderness. I walked all day following out a maze of paths that led to Annie's Bog, Indiola Bog, Sheep Pen's Hill and around in a great circle to Lower Mill. I saw nothing unusual among the birds that day except a broad-winged hawk. Juncos, Carolina Chickadees, Buzzards, Myrtle Warblers, Tree Sparrows, Downy and Hairy Woodpeck-

ers, Brown Creepers, Whitethroats and Song Sparrows made up my bird-list for the day. I walked until after sunset and as I came home through the twilight I heard the hoot of the Great Horned Owl. "Hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo, hoo," it sounded with the second note usually doubled. In my experience the Barred Owl almost invariably doubles the third note and drops on the last, while the Great Horned Owl doubles the second and keeps the same cadence all the way through. I reached the cabin by dark. Followed a wonderful exhibition of free-hand cooking and a long dreamy evening with a book before a roaring fire. Then I banked up the fire for the night, pulled my bed almost into the curved fire-place and slept as only he can who has been out in the open all day.

The next morning dawned cold and rainy, about as unpromising a day for locating birds as could well be found. I planned to tramp to Lower Mill and then around to Upper Mill and back through the woods, a circle of about ten miles. I found that in my greediness the night before I had eaten everything in the larder except a tin of corned-beef and six pickles, which I fell upon like a wolf. Anyone who has placed himself outside of a can of beef and six pickles is ready for great deeds and I started out feeling that in spite of the weather it was to be an eventful day. I saw no birds except a Brown Creeper until I reached the Lower Mill. Near the dam were a number of White-throated Sparrows and among them hopped a female chewink. Around a bend in the road I plodded through the rain. As I passed the mill suddenly from a small yellow locust tree by the roadside I heard a series of loud pips much like the note of the English Sparrow. I looked up and there was my great adventure.

The tree was fairly filled with a flock of large, plump birds. At first I thought they were Cedarbirds but the moment I caught sight of their coloring I realized that I was in the presence of my first flock of Evening Grosbeaks, a bird which I had never seen before outside of a book. The birds sat motionless for some time in the rain and I had an opportunity to count them three times in succession and found that the flock consisted of seventy-four which, so far as I can discover, is the largest accurately numbered flock recorded. Less than a third of them were males in

full plumage. With their black heads, golden foreheads, thick greenish-white beaks, wings half black and half white, dusky-gold backs and breasts and forked, black tails, they impressed me as the most spectacular birds I had ever seen. Perhaps this was owing to the winter background of cold rain, brown fields and leafless trees and the rarity of the birds themselves. Still I think, however, that under any surroundings a male evening grosbeak would always attract attention. The place where I saw them was in the township of New Lisbon in Burlington County, New Jersey, about two miles from the New Lisbon station at a place called Lower Mill. The flock seemed to be restless rather than shy. I could approach within twenty feet of them but they never stayed in one place for any length of time. Besides the sparrow-like note, which first attracted my attention, they gave a sort of trilling chirp. Once they all started like a flock of Goldfinches or Grackles chirping and calling together, making a chirring chorus. When they flew they sometimes gave a call-note. The resemblance of the bird to a monstrous Goldfinch was very marked, just as the Pine Grosbeak looks like a huge Purple Finch and the Blue Grosbeak like an overgrown Indigo-bird. When I first saw them one of the birds had a pod of the yellow locust in its beak. On subsequent occasions I often found them in locust trees and would see on the ground pieces of freshly opened pods but I cannot say that I ever saw them actually eating one of the locust beans. Their favorite food at all the times I have observed them were the pits of the common wild black-cherries (*Prunus serotina*).

On February 11th I again went to New Lisbon and found the whole flock of Grosbeaks feeding, this time on the ground not far from a house at about half-past ten in the morning. I followed them for some time around a circle in the clearings among pitch-pine trees, about a hundred yards in diameter and found that they went from one wild-cherry tree to another. Afterwards my son Gurdon first discovered that the ground under these trees was covered with cherry-stones neatly split in half while the droppings of the birds showed that they had fed there for a considerable space of time.

I went back to my cabin and brought some of my family and

friends back to the Lower Mill in whose clearing the grosbeak had been feeding. This time they were farther down the road, as usual under a wild-cherry tree. The flock seemed much smaller, comprising not more than forty birds. This time I noted that they had three distinct notes, the usual call which is like the chirp of an English Sparrow, a chirring chorus when all sing together in a tree, and a single clear flight-note.

The next time I saw this flock was on February 17th when I again found them in the morning about eleven o'clock feeding on the ground near the usual place. This time there were not more than thirty in the flock. The miller told me that in the early morning they came into his front yard and even on his porch and that at first there were as many as one hundred in the flock. This is undoubtedly only an estimate on his part. He also reported that they fed on the crumbs which his children put out for them, another statement which I would be inclined to doubt as the evening grosbeak is essentially a nut-cracker. This same miller I afterwards found was shooting the males and selling them for one dollar each, which probably accounted for the steady decrease of the flock. He stated that although he had lived in and near New Lisbon all his life he had never before seen this bird. At this time I noted the slightly forked short tails of the birds and the strange effect which the yellow ring around the eye gives the bird when seen in profile, giving it a curious, spectacled appearance. The huge beak and the short tail also give the bird a clumsy appearance. From my study of this and other flocks they seem to be rather a stolid bird in their behavior. On this day one of my neighbors reported that he had seen a flock at Brown's Mills on January 10th. As this is only a few miles from New Lisbon I am inclined to believe that it was the same flock as mine, since I could never find my flock except in the morning and they seemed to have separate feeding places for the afternoon and morning. On that same day, February 17th, George H. Stuart, 3rd, saw a pair in the afternoon, a male and female, not far from the house at Lower Mill. On that date I also saw several places where the Grosbeaks had torn open the pods of the yellow locust.

On February 22nd I again visited New Lisbon with a number

of members of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club. There had been a light fall of snow the night before which covered the ground under the wild-cherry trees and there was no sign of the flock of Grosbeaks in the morning. In the afternoon some of the members of the Club located and collected four female evening grosbeaks in the woods on the edge of the clearing on the opposite side to where I had always found the bird before. They were found in the top of a pitch-pine tree. An examination of the collected specimens showed the beak to be greenish-yellow when seen nearby although in the distance it has a white effect. Their crops were filled with the buds and embryo needles of the pitch-pine. The records of this bird show that it has been found feeding on the berries of the red-cedar, climbing bittersweet, apple and crab-apple seeds, elm and maple buds, box-elder seeds, and berries of flowering dogwood besides hemp and sunflower seeds. The iris of the eye was red and the legs and feet of a grayish-pink color. The plumage of the females showed mottled black-and-white wings and greenish-yellow back and breast.

The flight of the Evening Grosbeak is straight and swift. The miller told us that the flock had been in his dooryard the morning before but not the morning after the snowfall. My last sight of this New Lisbon flock was on March 11th at six-fifty a. m. They were in an apple tree back of the miller's barn and I located them by hearing their loud English Sparrow-like call. This time I also identified another note which seemed to me like the chirp of a Robin, only trilled. This is probably the note which they all make when they chir in chorus. When I came near them they all sat stolidly and silently in the tree for nearly ten minutes, evidently patiently waiting for me to go. Finally they began to fly one by one to the ground and soon began cracking and eating cherry pits from a cherry tree which stood next to the apple tree. I looked under several cherry trees that morning and under every one found the ground covered with cracked seeds, even under the leaves, showing that the birds had hunted out the pits from every tree. I counted fifteen in this flock although there were probably twenty, but owing to the constant moving about of

the birds I could not make an absolutely accurate count. I could see only two males. Finally the birds flew over into the woods and I followed after them. They lit on the ground and walked toward me until they were not over thirty feet away. Again I noted the uncanny spectacled look which the yellow line over the eye gives the bird. That spectacled appearance and the unnatural white beak would alone, outside of the brilliant coloring of the males, make the Evening Grosbeak noticeable anywhere as a strange, unusual-looking bird. Again the flock impressed me not as shy but as wonderfully alert. While they were close to me on the ground I happened to move a single finger of my left hand suddenly. At once the whole flock took to flight and flew over to a tree-top by the side of the road near where I first saw them. As I had watched them for half an hour and was chilled to the bone by the cold rain, I went back to my cabin. My last sight of this New Lisbon flock was of the birds sitting in a tree-top near where I had first seen them in the same kind of a driving cold rain.

On Sunday morning March 25, I was coming back from Darby Creek near Haverford, in Delaware Co., Pennsylvania between nine and ten in the morning with my son Gurdon and a friend, Theodore Spencer. We had been out getting a bird-list and were coming back up along a little swale of trees through which a tiny brook runs not far from the intersection of Darby Road and Highland Avenue. As we were hurrying home I suddenly heard in the bushes in the middle of this swale, several loud pips and stopped the boys and told them that the notes sounded like those of the Evening Grosbeak. As we came nearer to the swale my boy Gurdon first caught sight of a male evening grosbeak on a branch of a low tree. They had been feeding on the ground under a cherry tree. There were six in the flock, four which I thought were females and two males. So far as I know these are the first Evening Grosbeaks to be reported from Delaware Co., Pa. The next morning, March 26, at seven-ten I reached this little run and heard them some distance away. I could only find four, one male and three females, on a tree. They were at the head of the swale near the road. They flew down to the ground and began feeding on cherry pits which I

could hear them cracking some distance away. They would take the pits well out of sight back into their beaks keeping their bills half open in a comical manner as if they had a bone in their throat. A second later there would be a cracking noise and out would drop two nicely split segments of the cherry pits, the stone having been swallowed. The male of this flock seemed much shyer than the females, perhaps having already been hunted for his plumage, and kept in the deep thickets. When I came quite near, they flew into a tree, the male and two females in one and another female in a separate tree. Suddenly they all flew away without giving any call. When on the ground they could easily be overlooked in the dense thickets.

On March 31, in the afternoon I walked all through this swale but found no sign of the Grosbeaks. On April 1, I found them again in this swale of trees at eight-ten A. M., this time much farther from the road than before. Each time I located them by their call of "pip, pip." They seem to almost invariably make this call when sitting together in trees. When feeding on the ground, however, they are absolutely silent, having no twittering or feeding notes.

On April 1st after I had located them they moved farther down the swale and I lost sight of them. Following down the run I finally saw them all feeding silently in a tree on the seeds of the poison ivy. They would sidle along the limbs of the tree exactly like a parrot does along its perch. From my personal observations they have fed on cherry-pits, locust-beans, pitch-pine pods and embryo needles and the berries of the poison ivy. A flock at Hammonton, New Jersey was also reported as feeding on the seeds of the box-elder.

On April 1st, after I had watched them feeding the birds perched in a perpendicular line, one above the other, in a tree, giving an unusual opportunity for comparing them. There were five. One was a male in full plumage, the brightest male that I have seen. My color-notes taken at the time describe his breast and back as a dark brownish-gold brightening to a canary-yellow on the side with a gold line over the eye. Four of the others were undoubtedly females, showing the curious mottled black-and-white wings characteristic of the females whereas in the males the wings are

half black and half white, the black and white being in solid colors. One of the birds seemed to be an immature male. I am aware that the authorities state that the male grosbeak passes into full plumage after its first molting with no transition stage. This bird, however, I observed very closely for a considerable length of time with a strong glass. The back was yellowish instead of being gray like the females, and the wings were of a dirty white color instead of being mottled black and white as with the three females. Once the flock separated and immediately began calling to each other from different parts of the swale. Usually however they kept together, although sometimes one female would perch in a tree some distance from the other four. While I was observing them I heard the alarm-note of the Cardinal Grosbeak and suddenly down the swale a fine specimen of the Cardinal appeared. By turning my head I was able to compare the grosbeak of the south with his brother of the north. The cardinal grosbeak seemed much more alert and fuller of nervous energy than his stolid relatives while his long tail and crest made him appear a much longer, lithier, more graceful bird. I note that at Kalamazoo, Michigan, an observer once found the evening and the Rose-breasted Grosbeaks together.

On April 14th I visited the run again in the afternoon but found no grosbeaks. On April 15th I started to visit this little valley which my children had christened Grosbeak Run. As I came to the Haverford College station of the Philadelphia and Western Railroad I heard from the Lombardy poplars beside the tracks the familiar "pip, pip" of the evening grosbeak. With some difficulty I finally located the bird which was calling, a solitary female. Looking through the trees, I finally located three more: another female, the immature male which I have already described and the male in full plumage. It was undoubtedly the little flock from Grosbeak Run with one missing, for when I went over there later in the morning I could find no Grosbeaks. Against the light the head and neck of the male seemed to be a dark brown with gold shades through it. Both the male and female of the Grosbeaks seemed to give the same call and equally often. The immature male was gray where

the mature male was gold and the white stripe on his wing was a dusky white instead of the pure white of the mature male. Besides the call-note they gave the rippling little trill which I have already described.

This was my last sight of the Evening Grosbeaks. They were seen a couple of times after that by my children and one of my friends near the station and later that month two or three were reported near Bryn Mawr which I presume were a part of the same flock.

Some of the records as collected by me for the evening grosbeak in Pennsylvania and New Jersey for 1917 are as follows: Miss Wallace on November 30th at Norristown saw three females. They were also reported at Oaks, Pennsylvania not far from Perkiomen Creek, and on December 5th at Cinnaminson, New Jersey by Charles Evans; December 24th by D. W. Pumyea, Smithville, New Jersey and December 26th at Westville, New Jersey by Julian K. Potter. W. J. Serrill reported a male in full plumage near Mill Creek at Ardmore, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania in January but was unable to give the exact date. On January 10th Doctor Darlington reported a flock at Brown's Mills, New Jersey.

The history of the Evening Grosbeak illustrates how far-reaching a bit of inaccurate observation can be.

The first specimen of which there is any record was sent to the New York Lyceum from Sault Ste Marie near Lake Superior by H. R. Schoolcraft. It was labeled Paushkundamo meaning "berry-breaker" in the Chippewa dialect. In regard to this specimen Schoolcraft wrote as follows:

Bird first appeared about Sault Ste Marie in Michigan Territory during the first week in April 1823. The individual under examination was shot on the 7th of April in the evening. An Indian boy was attracted into the woods by its peculiar and, to him, strange note. There were a few birds in company. They were seen for a short time about the place but none have since appeared. The species is said to be common about the head of Lake Superior at Fond du Lac.

The next record of the bird was made by one Major Delafield, an agent of the United States government for boundaries. In 1823 he was camping near the Savannah river, northwest from

Lake Superior. There he met a flock of Evening Grosbeaks. Here is his story :

At twilight the bird, which I had before heard to cry in a singular strain and only at this hour, made its appearance close by my tent and a flock of about half a dozen perched on the bushes in my encampment. They approached so near and were so fearless that my canoe-men attempted to catch them, but in vain. I recognized this bird as similar to one in possession of Mr. Schoolcraft at the Sault Ste Marie. Its mournful cry about the hour of my encamping, which was at sunset, had before attracted my attention but I could never get sight of the bird but on this occasion. There is an extensive plain and swamp through which flows the Savannah river, covered with a thick growth of sapin trees. My inference was then, and is now, that this bird dwells in such dark retreats and leaves them at the approach of night.

This twilight reputation was fastened forever upon the defenseless bird when William Cooper in January, 1825 described the bird in the annals of the New York Lyceum (Volume I, page 220) as *Fringilla vespertina*.

Prince Lucian Bonaparte in Volume II of his American Ornithology took up the tale. He saw two males that had been shot early in the spring at Athabasca Lake near the Rocky Mountains in the collection of Mr. Leadbeater of London, both of which were males. Accordingly he wrote:

Only at twilight they are heard to cry in a singular strain. The mournful sound uttered at such an unusual hour strikes the traveler's ear but the bird itself is seldom seen. . . . No difference of any consequence is observable between the sexes although it might be said that the female is a little less in size and rather duller in plumage.

In 1832 Nuttall in his "Manual of Ornithology," page 526, embroidered the original surmise:

They appear to pass most of the day in the deep and lonely swamps. . . . From these they sally forth in small families to feed toward the approach of night and at this season in the dusk of twilight their strange and mournful notes are heard from the forests, while the sad and serenading minstrel himself remains concealed, though at other times they are so fearless or incautious as to suffer themselves to be seized almost by the hand.

On May 27, 1836 Townsend writing from the Columbia river corrects the mistakes of Delafield, Bonaparte and Nuttall and

gives a perfectly accurate account of the evening grosbeak, its habits and its song. He writes in part:

The accounts that have been published respecting them by the only two authors to whom I have access, Mr. Nuttall and Bonaparte, are in many respects incorrect. In the first place, it is stated that they are retiring and silent during the day and sing only on the approach of evening. Here they are remarkably noisy during the whole of the day from sunrise to sunset. They then retire quietly to their roosts in the summits of the tall pines and are not aroused until daylight streaks the east when they come forth to feed as before. . . . At other times, particularly about midday, the male sometimes selects a lofty pine branch and then attempts a song, but it is a miserable failure and he seems conscious of it, for he frequently pauses and looks discontented, then remains silent sometimes for some minutes and tries it again but with no better success. The note is a single warbling call, exceedingly like the early part of the robin's song but not so sweet and checked as though the performer were out of breath. The song, if it may be so called, is to me a most wearisome one. I am constantly listening to hear the stave continued and am as constantly disappointed. Another error of the books is this: they both state that the female is similar to the male in plumage. Now, this is entirely a mistake. She is so very different in color and markings that were it not for the size and color of the bill and its peculiar physiognomy one might be induced to suppose it another species. The specimens in possession of Mr. Leadbeater in London and from which Prince Bonaparte drew up his description must all have been males.

In spite of this correction Coues harks back to the birds' alleged twilight habits in his "Key to North American Birds" and has a passage on the Evening Grosbeak which is worth quoting as a specimen of the rhetoric in which a past generation of ornithologists dared to indulge.

A bird of distinguished appearance whose very name suggests the far-away land of the dipping sun and the tuneful romance which the wild bird throws around the close of day. Clothed in striking color-contrast of black, white and gold, he seems to represent the allegory of diurnal transmutation; for his sable pinions close around the brightness of his vesture, as night encompasses golden hues of sunset while the clear white space enfolded in these tints foretells the dawn of the morrow.

Finally Languille as late as 1884 wrote that the Evening Grosbeak is noted for its melodious evening song. Even yet both the English and the modern scientific names for the bird,

Hesperiphona vespertina vespertina perpetuates in three languages the myth that this grosbeak only sings at twilight.

Stuart E. White at Grand Rapids, Michigan in 1890 observed flocks of the Evening Grosbeaks all through May and writes this about their song :

The song is a wandering, jerky warble beginning low, suddenly increasing in power and suddenly ceasing as though the singer were out of breath.

In closing, let me chronicle for the inspiration of all ardent oologists the fact that the first recorded nest was taken on May 10, 1886 by E. H. Fiske in Yolo County, California. At that time the incubation was so far advanced that it was impossible to preserve the eggs. They were reported to be like those of the Black-headed Grosbeak. Since the migration of these birds to the Eastern states seems to be steadily increasing and on April 17, 1911 at Ithaca, New York a female was seen breaking sticks, evidently in preparation for a nest, it is not at all impossible that the bird may yet be found nesting within collecting distance of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club.