

ABOUT THE COVER: Evening Grosbeak

It was a government official who provided the name of Evening Grosbeak—clearly a misnomer since the bird is most active in the morning. In August 1823, Major Delafield, acting as a United States boundary agent northwest of Lake Superior, made some observations about Evening Grosbeaks.

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....My inference was then, and is now, that this bird dwells in such dark retreats, and leaves them at the approach of night.

William Cooper in 1825 took Delafield's inference seriously and named the bird Evening Grosbeak, *Hesperiphona vespertina*. The genus name is derived from Greek and refers to the Hesperides, a legendary garden of golden apples located on the far western verge of the world where the sun goes down and to the nymphs who guard this place with the aid of a dragon. This romanticism lasted until 1982 when *Hesperiphona* was decreed to be congeneric with *Coccothraustes* (Greek for "kernel breaker"), and Evening Grosbeaks were renamed *Coccothraustes vespertinus*. Major Delafield's notion about them being birds of the evening was retained in the specific name.

According to Forbush, until the winter of 1889-90, Evening Grosbeaks were virtually unknown as far east as Ohio. During that winter, however, New Englanders started to get lucky as a great eastward invasion occurred extending almost as far as the Atlantic coast of Massachusetts. One more big invasion came in 1910-11, and gradually Evening Grosbeaks became established as residents in southeastern Canada and northeastern United States. It was suggested by Dr. Walter Faxon that the box elder (*Acer negundo*) or ashleaf maple may have facilitated the eastward spread of the Evening Grosbeak since the buds and seeds of this tree are favored by the birds above all others. Widely planted as an ornamental and shade tree, the box elder's distribution was expanded and may have indirectly helped move the grosbeaks eastward.

Outside of the breeding season, Evening Grosbeak flocks wander widely in search of food, making their presence in any one locality irregular. They feed on some insect food when available, but the bulk of their diet consists of seeds, buds, and fruits from a variety of wild and cultivated trees and shrubs. Seeds and nuts have little chance against the grosbeak's huge conical bill. They also have a fondness for salt, especially available to them in wintertime when roads are salted.

Whether nymphs of the evening or kernel breakers, Evening Grosbeaks are a colorful sight. Forbush called them "beautiful waifs of the northland...exotic

plant[s] blossoming in a New England winter." Elliott Coues (1879) was so inspired by Evening Grosbeaks that he said,

In full plumage this is a bird of distinguished appearance, whose very name suggests the faraway land of the dipping sun, and the tuneful romance which the wild bird throws around the fading light of day; clothed in striking color contrasts 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 the golden hues of sunset, while the clear white space enfolded in these tints foretells the dawn of the morrow.

Took the words right out of my mouth!

J. B. Hallett, Jr.

MEET OUR COVER ARTIST: John Sill

A black-and-white translation of John Sill's handsome watercolor of a male Evening Grosbeak graces the cover of *Bird Observer* this month, the third cover contributed by this artist and the Stephen Greene Press, the publishers of the *Bird Identification Calendar*.

John Sill is a graduate in wildlife biology of North Carolina State University who received his training as a watercolorist from his artist father, Charles Sill. An award-winning artist, John has produced the pictures for this calendar series since its inception. As is apparent from his work, John is a careful observer of wildlife as well as an enthusiastic birder. The family gallery in which his work is displayed is in Franklin, North Carolina, where John resides with his wife Cathy.

Corrigendum. There is an error in the third paragraph of the discussion of the Common Eider on page 354 of the December 1988 *Bird Observer*. The first sentence of that paragraph should read as follows: "It is always worth checking flocks of Common Eiders for King Eiders, their slightly *smaller* cousins."