

Birds commonly manifest a host of physical abnormalities. Some of these are as subtle as deformed toes, feet, or bills; others may be as striking as totally white albino or totally black melanistic individuals. Birdbanders who have the opportunity to observe large numbers of birds at close range are particularly aware of the high incidence of such conditions in wild bird populations. In most cases, these minor abnormalities have little effect on the well-being of the bird displaying the condition. Perhaps of greater significance is the consternation that certain plumage abnormalities cause birders who are unprepared for bizarre coloration anomalies.

February's mystery photograph depicts an anomalous plumage. The overall shape of the bird, its large bill size, black-and-white wing pattern, and characteristic posture on a sunflower seed feeder all suggest that the bird is an Evening Grosbeak (*Coccothraustes vespertinus*). Lacking, however, are the normally black crown; yellow eyebrow stripe; dark brown head, chest, and back; and black tail. Even in the black-and-white photograph, there is little contrast between the yellow belly and normally darker colored areas. In reality, the bird in the picture is largely bright yellow and has contrasting black wings with white patches. This Evening Grosbeak displays a condition called xanthochroism—a situation in which its body has failed to produce the dark pigments which normally combine with yellow in some parts of its plumage. While this particular plumage abnormality is fairly common in cage birds, it is not frequent in the wild.

The point of this discussion is simply to highlight the fact that there are a number of related abnormal plumage conditions which can confound and confuse field observers who encounter them for the first time. Perhaps the most familiar of these plumage aberrations is leucism — a condition generally



manifested by an overall dilution of dark pigmentation or by the possession of varying degrees of abnormal white feathering (see *Bird Observer* 19:309).

The strikingly-colored Evening Grosbeak in the picture was photographed in New Hampshire at the feeder of David Rowell.

## AT A GLANCE

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Photo by Wayne R. Petersen



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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