

ABOUT THE COVER: PINE GROSBEAK

Henry David Thoreau was so impressed with the "dazzling beauty" and melodious song of Pine Grosbeaks that he referred to them as "angels from the north." The scientific name *Pinicola enucleator* aptly describes the species, the generic name meaning "pine-dweller" and the species name meaning "one who takes the kernel out." Even the folk name "mope" describes the sluggish movements and tame demeanor of this plump winter visitor from the north. About the size of an American Robin, Pine Grosbeaks are easily identified by their size, which separates them from the much smaller redpolls, Purple and House finches, and crossbills, and by their color. Males are rosy-pink with white wing-bars, while females and immature birds are largely gray with yellowish to orange heads and rumps. The long (for a grosbeak) forked tail distinguishes them in flight from Evening Grosbeaks, and their slightly undulating flight from robins and other similarly sized birds. They are generally so tame that identification can be made with the aid of a magnifying glass if need be.

Pine Grosbeaks are Holarctic in distribution, present worldwide wherever open coniferous forests exist in northern latitudes. The species is polytypic, with five subspecies breeding in North America alone. Pine Grosbeaks breed in northern open coniferous forests north to the edge of the tundra, from Alaska across Canada to the Great Lakes and northernmost New England, and south through the Rocky Mountains, with local populations in the mountains of California. The northernmost populations may migrate south in winter, but many birds are sedentary, or nomadic and irruptive in times of food scarcity during northern winters. Pine Grosbeaks may venture throughout the midwest and as far south as New Jersey during irruptions. In Massachusetts during an irruptive year, Pine Grosbeaks generally arrive during October or November, disappear, and then reappear during midwinter. Usually the irruptive flocks consist mostly of females and immatures, with few of the magnificent rosy-red males. Pine Grosbeaks are considered rare to uncommon winter visitors to Massachusetts, with irruptions widely separated and correlated with good years for ash-seed, e.g., 1892-93, 1930-31, 1950-51, 1961-62, 1977-78. Recent high counts are of about 400 birds.

The breeding biology of these birds of the northern wilds is poorly known. They are probably monogamous, producing a single brood. They breed in the northern open coniferous forests of larch, hemlock, and wet, mossy bogs. Their song has been described as sweet and melodious, a clear, whistled, continuous musical warble *chee-vli* or *caree* somewhat resembling the song of the Purple Finch, with various flight (*pui pui pui*), contact, and location calls. Males are known to practice courtship feeding. Nests are usually low in shrubs or trees, bulky cups of twigs and roots, lined with rootlets, lichens, hair, and grass. The clutch is from two to five (usually four) bluish-green eggs, speckled, mottled or

blotched brown, black or gray. Incubation is by the female for about two weeks, with the male bringing her food. The fledging period is two to three weeks with both parents feeding the young. In breeding season both parents develop a pair of pouches toward the front of their mouths for carrying food for the young.

In winter Pine Grosbeaks take more than ninety-nine percent vegetable food, sometimes foraging in mixed species flocks with redpolls, crossbills, and waxwings. They eat mostly buds of maple, birch, mountain ash, poplar, and willow, and seeds of evergreens, grasses, and weeds. They frequently forage in orchards and love crab-apples and apples. In summer insects and spiders may make up fifteen percent of their diet. They will eat rose and sunflower seeds, acorns, and dogwood. They tend to be methodical feeders, remaining in an area until they have depleted the food supply, a trait that endears them to birders who can often count on a flock's presence at a particular locality until a weekend makes a viewing junket possible.

Pine Grosbeaks live in remote areas where the threats of pollution are low, and hence are not currently threatened, although clear-cutting of conifer forests is a potential threat. Their irregular movements, remoteness, and tameness are features that make Pine Grosbeaks enigmatic, understudied, and a great potential research project for the adventuresome. These features, together with this bird's beauty, make it worth venturing forth on cold winter days whenever lack of food drives Pine Grosbeaks into our area.

— William E. Davis, Jr.

ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

Barry Van Dusen, a wildlife artist and illustrator based in Princeton, Massachusetts, frequently contributes his insightful bird drawings to *Bird Observer*. Some of Barry's art will be appearing in a two-person show, titled "A Passion for Birds," at Massachusetts Audubon's South Shore Regional Center in Marshfield, Massachusetts, beginning on May 5, 2000. James Coe will be the other artist featured. For more information, call the Center at (781) 837-9400. Beginning in March 2000 and continuing through November, the Burrell Collection in Glasgow, Scotland, will be showing a range of the work Barry began in the fall of 1997 as part of "Project Tiger." In addition to preparing work for a variety of upcoming juried shows, Barry has been working on illustrations to be used with the "Birdsong Identifier," a new product designed to facilitate the identification of bird songs in the field.