

The Evening Grosbeak in Mississippi

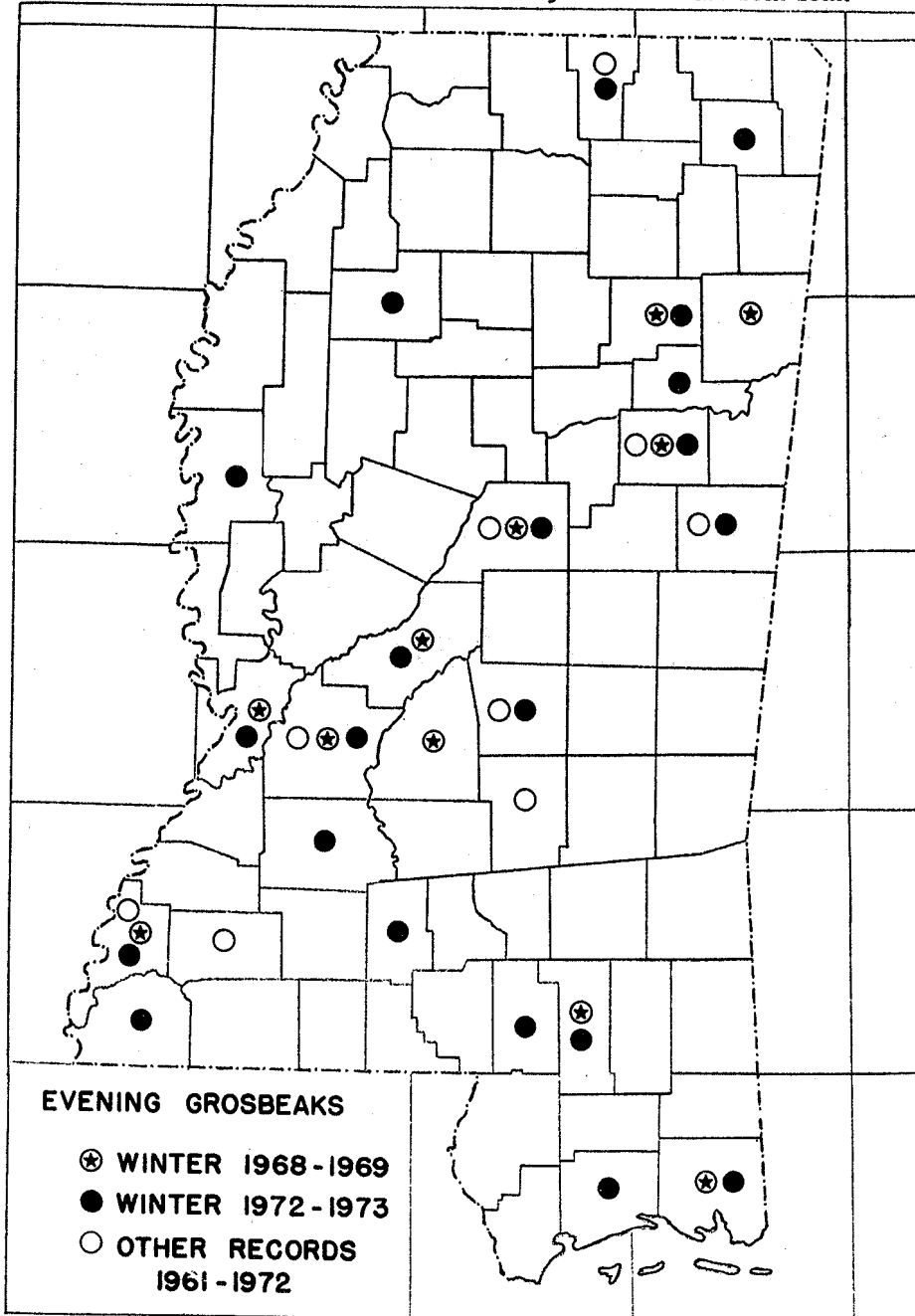
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At the end of the 19th century the evening grosbeak (Hesperiphona vespertina) was reported spreading both its breeding and wintering range eastward from north central North America (Speirs, 1968). This expansion continued through the early decades of the twentieth century such that it is now looked on as a regular winter visitor in New England. Between 1950 and 1955 Evening Grosbeaks began invading Georgia in the winter (Speirs, 1968) and since about 1956 they have been rare to locally common in Alabama in the winter (Imhof, 1962). The first record of the species in Mississippi appears to be 8 birds seen from 17 to 19 December 1961 in Franklin County by E. G. Sullivan (1962). On 22 February 1962 B. E. Gandy collected the first specimen record for the state in Jackson (Hinds Co.) (Gandy, 1962a). Small flocks were seen in Jackson through April, and one female was reported as late as 2 May 1962 (Gandy, 1962b).

Evening Grosbeaks weren't reported in the state again until February 1966 (Turcotte, 1966a) when 10-15 were seen in Jackson and flocks (Turcotte, 1966b) were reported at Kosciusko (Attala Co.) and Raleigh (Smith Co.). Turcotte (1969) reported a "spectacular invasion" of Evening Grosbeaks into Mississippi during the winter of 1968-1969 (Figure 1). Grosbeaks were reported from Adams, Attala, Benton, Hinds and Oktibbeha counties during the winter of 1969-1970 (Turcotte, 1970; Morgan, 1971; Coffey, 1971) and from Benton, Hinds, Noxubee, Oktibbeha, and Scott counties during the winter of 1971-1972 (Coffey, 1972; Hanson, 1972; Turcotte, 1972a and b).

The winter of 1972-1973 brought another spectacular invasion of Evening Grosbeaks. In order to document the distribution and relative magnitude of the invasion in different parts of the state I distributed a questionnaire to M.O.S. members and friends. Forty-two persons responded to the survey, documenting the occurrence of the species in every part of

Figure 1. Mississippi counties in which Evening Grosbeaks have been seen.



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the state (Figure 1). Greatest numbers of birds were reported in the east-central part of the state, while very few were seen in the Mississippi delta (Table 1). The earliest and latest records thus far for the species in Mississippi were recorded during this invasion. John T. Morrow observed a small flock near Starkville in Oktibbeha County on 23 November, and Lewis (1972) reported 12-15 Evening Grosbeaks on the Marion County Game Management area on 24 November. I had one individual at a feeder in Oktibbeha County as late as 10 May.

Most respondents to the survey reported grosbeaks eating sunflower seeds at feeders and I can't help but wonder if the large number of Mississippians feeding the birds didn't have an influence on the numbers of grosbeaks we had and perhaps also on the length of time they were with us. On the other hand, several respondents listed natural foods used by the species. These foods included buds of black cherry, plum, elm, and oak, berries of wax myrtle, and seeds of hackberry, American elm, Chinaberry, sweetgum, box elder, and grass. Sullivan (1962) also reported the species eating the seeds of blue beech. Speirs (1968) suggests that the most important native food of the Evening Grosbeak is the fruit of the maple trees, especially that of the box elder, Chamberlain (1952), on the other hand, reported that pine seeds were the main food of grosbeaks during the winter invasion of North Carolina in 1952. Many persons responding to our questionnaire associated Evening Grosbeaks with pines - though none mentioned them eating pine seed. Throughout the winter I regularly saw large flocks foraging on the ground under loblolly pines at Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge and assume they could have been feeding on pine seeds. If pine seeds are important in the natural winter diet of the Evening Grosbeak, this may explain the paucity of records from the Mississippi delta where there are few pines and, indeed, may explain why the winter of 1972-1973 was an invasion year. As I reported earlier (Jackson, 1973), the pine cone crop failed in the northern part of the continent in 1972.

Mrs. F. C. Hathorn of Hattiesburg kept careful notes on a flock of nearly 100 grosbeaks that roosted in an oak tree in her yard every night. She noted

Table 1. Summary of data on the distribution of Evening Grosbeaks in Mississippi, winter 1972-1973.

County	Number of Observers	Range in Number of Birds Seen	Range in Dates of Observation
Adams	1	4-60	23 Dec.-19 Apr.
Attala	3	15-40	7 Feb.-6 May
Chickasaw	1	many	1 Feb.-late Apr.
Clay	1	49	12 Jan.
Copiah	1	5-40	21 Jan.-5 Apr.
Forrest	6	0-100	4 Dec.-5 May
Harrison	4	0-8	26 Dec.-18 Apr.
Hinds	7	0-30	3 Jan.-2 May
Jackson	2	0-21	8 Jan.-11 Apr.
Lamar	1	24	12 Dec.-1 May
Lawrence	1	3-30	21 Jan.-17 Feb.
Madison	1	5	7 Apr.
Marion	1	12-15	24 Nov.
Noxubee	2	4-200	25 Dec.-23 Apr.
Oktibbeha	3	24-200	23 Nov.-10 May
Prentiss	1	16-30	7 Jan.-30 Apr.
Scott	1	50	Dec.-23 Apr.
Tallahatchie	1	8	Feb.
Warren	1	30	21 Feb.-20 Apr.
Washington	2	1-2	29 Jan. and 14 Feb. only
Wilkinson	1	18-30	no dates given

that they were usually quiet after dark, but that well after dark on the evening of 15 April the birds were "quite noisy". The next day about half of the birds were gone. The same "noisy chattering" occurred again in the early evening of 22 April and the next day only about 12 birds remained. Evening Grosbeaks, like many of our small birds, migrate at night and stop to feed and rest during the day. Data from all areas of the state indicate that most Evening Grosbeaks left during the third week of April and that only a few individuals lingered until the first week in May.

The report in Turcotte (1969) of adults feeding young in Jackson between 20 and 26 April refers most likely to a case of courtship feeding. Downs (1958) describes a female Evening Grosbeak soliciting food from a male by "'flirting' her tail (a quick spreading and closing of the tail), bobbing her head and swinging her body slightly in front of the male." Such behavior is similar to the begging of a young bird and could be easily misinterpreted by a person unfamiliar with courtship feeding. Speirs (1968) notes that Evening Grosbeaks are late nesters and frequently stay in the vicinity of feeding stations until May. It does seem likely, in view of the range extension of the species eastward earlier in this century, that it may eventually become a breeding bird in the montane areas of Alabama. The Evening Grosbeak in Mississippi must for the present be considered an irregular winter resident that may be found anywhere in the state during an "invasion" year.

Acknowledgments

The collection of the data presented here was only possible because of the cooperation of those who completed my questionnaire. I sincerely appreciate their help.

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Observations On The Nesting

Ecology of Barn Swallows

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to report on a brief study of the nesting ecology of the Barn Swallow (Hirundo rustica) in Mississippi. Specific intentions were to make observations which might aid in a comprehensive study of Barn Swallows nesting under bridges in Oktibbeha and Lowndes County in Mississippi. This study included forty-one pairs of nesting birds; plus, at the time of conclusion of the study period, 68 nestlings. Field observations were taken between May 4 and May 14, 1972, and included a total of twenty hours of actual field work.

Methods and Techniques

Thirteen bridges were selected for study. Each nest was numbered and individual records kept. Observations were taken every two or three days. An aluminum pole with an attached mirror was used to view the inside of nests. No attempts were made to record the presence of adults on the nest (unless nest was solitary, rather than colonial). In certain instances, nests were constructed with top of the cup very near the bottom of the bridge, making placement of