

John Farrand, Jr. MOMENTS IN HISTORY

How the Evening Grosbeak Got Its Name

Every birder knows that it is not a retiring species, that it doesn't hide in "deep and lonely swamps," and that it calls at all hours of the day.

SAULT STE. MARIE, LOCATED beside a series of mighty rapids not far down the St. Marys River from the outlet of Lake Superior, was founded by Father Marquette as a Jesuit mission in 1668, making it the oldest white settlement in what is now the state of Michigan. During the eighteenth century, a succession of French and British trading posts occupied the site, which had long been an important fishing place for the Chippewa Indians. Less than a decade after the end of the War of 1812, when the western border between the United States and British territory to the north had yet to be determined, the United States took possession of Sault Ste. Marie. Here the Americans built Fort Brady, which remained a military site until after the Second World War.

In 1822, the year Fort Brady was completed, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft arrived at Sault Ste. Marie to take up

his duties as United States Indian Agent for the tribes living in the region around Lake Superior. Already a noted ethnologist and explorer, and the man who later identified Lake Itasca in Minnesota as the source of the Mississippi River, Schoolcraft quickly set to work recording the language and culture of the Chippewas. Before long, he had compiled a large Chippewa dictionary and had mastered the complex grammar of this Algonquian language.

On Monday, April 7, 1823, Schoolcraft wrote in his journal: "During severe winters, in the north, some species of birds extend their migrations farther south than usual. This appears to have been the case during the present season. A small bird, yellowish and cinereous, of the grosbec species, appeared this day in the neighborhood of one of the sugar-camps on the river below, and was shot with an arrow by an Indian boy, who brought it up to me. The Chippewas call it *Pashcundamo*." The Chippewa word *Pashcundamo*, or *Paushkundamo*, Schoolcraft later explained, can be translated "berry-breaker."

A few days after Schoolcraft had acquired the "berry-breaker," Major Joseph Delafield, boundary agent for the United States, made a brief stop at Sault Ste. Marie during the course

of his trip to plot the northern border of the United States after the War of 1812. Delafield and Schoolcraft were friends, and both were members of the Lyceum of Natural History of New-York. Schoolcraft showed Delafield the grosbeak and other specimens he had acquired during his stay at Sault Ste. Marie. Schoolcraft was starved for civilized company, and it is likely that the two men talked for many hours about the natural history of the vast and little-known Chippewa country before Delafield continued his journey on to the northwest, tracing what he hoped would become the permanent boundary between the United States and British America.

It is also likely that it was Delafield who recommended that Schoolcraft send his specimens to the Lyceum of Natural History of New-York, because within days of Delafield's visit—still in April 1823—a package left Sault Ste. Marie addressed to the Lyceum. In addition to the grosbeak, labeled "*Paushkundamo*," the package contained a Lynx, a Spruce Grouse, a Three-toed Woodpecker, a Ruddy Turnstone, a Snapping Turtle, a Painted Turtle, and a Bowfin. Schoolcraft followed the package with a letter to William Cooper, the leading ornithologist at the Lyceum and namesake of Cooper's Hawk; in the letter he explained the circumstances of the capture of the grosbeak.

Four months later, Major Delafield had crossed Lake Superior and was camped on the Savanne River, in the muskeg country a few miles east of Lac des Mille Lacs, and south of the present routes of the Trans-Canada Highway and the Canadian Pacific Railroad, in the Thunder Bay district of Ontario. In his journal for August 15, 1823, he wrote: "At twilight, the singular bird that cries at this hour, perched about the tent, and was identified with one seen by me at the Sault in Mr. Schoolcraft's possession." Delafield didn't collect a specimen, but he, too, sent his obser-



Early reports of the Evening Grosbeak by naturalists came from the Great Lakes region in the early 1800s. Chippewa Indians in the area called the bird “berry-breaker.”

vations to William Cooper.

By early 1825, Cooper had received Schoolcraft’s specimen and the two letters from Schoolcraft and Delafield. He had also decided that the grosbeak was a new species, which he proceeded to describe in the *Annals of the Lyceum of Natural History of New-York*. He called the bird *Fringilla vespertina*, or “finch of

the evening,” and it quickly became known as the Evening Grosbeak, the name adopted by Bonaparte, Nuttall, and Audubon, and still in use today. In place of Schoolcraft’s simple “yellowish and cinereous,” Cooper provided a detailed description of 162 words, which made it clear that the original specimen from Sault Ste. Marie was an adult male.

But both names—*Fringilla vespertina* and “Evening Grosbeak”—were based on a misconception. As soon as it was discovered, the bird became associated with the evening. Cooper chose *vespertina* because of what Schoolcraft and Delafield had said in their letters. Schoolcraft wrote that the bird had been shot “in the evening” (Schoolcraft’s italics), and added that “the Indian boy was attracted into the woods by its peculiar, and to him strange note.” Delafield was more explicit. “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 this 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.”

Authors who had no personal experience with the so-called Evening Grosbeak now took up the refrain.



The Evening Grosbeak was initially described as retiring and silent during the day. Most birders know the Grosbeak as noisy and a frequent visitor to winter feeders. Photo/D. & M. Zimmerman/VIREO

Charles Lucien Bonaparte, who treated the species in his *American Ornithology* in 1828, stated that: "Their note is strange and peculiar, and it is only at twilight that they are heard crying in a singular strain."

Even the careful Thomas Nuttall, in his *Manual of the Ornithology of the United States and Canada*, published in 1832, wrote that in spring these grosbeaks "appear to pass most of the day in the deep and lonely swamps, thickly overgrown with a gloomy and almost impervious forest of resinous evergreens. From these they sally forth in small families to feed towards the approach of night; and at this season, in the dusk of twilight, their strange and mournful notes are heard in the forest, while the sad and serenading minstrel himself remains concealed." Through this passage, rather thickly overgrown itself, we can trace the early inferences of Major Delafield. The association of this grosbeak with the evening seemed well established.

It took another personal encounter with the bird to set the record straight. John Kirk Townsend (of Townsend's Solitaire and Townsend's Warbler), who had collected the first female Evening Grosbeak in the Black Hills in 1834, spent most of 1836 at Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River. On May 27 of that year, he made the following entry in his journal: "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."

Audubon quoted this remark of Townsend's in Volume IV of his *Ornithological Biography* in 1838, and with that, the myth about the crepuscular habits of the Evening Grosbeak was exploded. Or almost. In 1850, Charles Lucien Bonaparte proposed that the so-called Evening Grosbeak be placed in a genus of its own, which he named *Hesperiphona*, or "voice of the evening." But Bonaparte may

merely have been coining an elegant name, and not expressing a view about the bird's habits; he had had 22 years to reconsider his comment of 1828. *Hesperiphona vespertina* is still the most familiar scientific name for the Evening Grosbeak.

But both names—*Fringilla vespertina* and "Evening Grosbeak"—were based on a misconception.

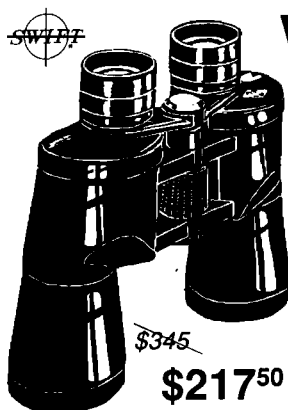
Today, the Evening Grosbeak has spread eastward from Lake Superior to the Maritime Provinces and Newfoundland, along with the boxelder, one of its main sources of food. It is a common winter visitor to feeders. Every birder knows that it is not a retiring species, that it doesn't hide in

"deep and lonely swamps," and that it calls at all hours of the day. Doris Heustis Speirs, writing in Bent's "Life Histories," has even suggested that a better name might have been "morning grosbeak." There is nothing strange or peculiar about its most common calls, and whether these calls are sad or mournful is a matter of opinion.

In 1983, the committee preparing the Sixth Edition of the A.O.U. *Check-list* dropped the genus *Hesperiphona* and placed the Evening Grosbeak in the genus *Coccothraustes*, which also includes the stout-billed Hawfinch of Eurasia. They were by no means the first ornithologists to make this suggestion.

Coccothraustes is a classical Greek name for a bird that has never been identified with certainty. It might have been the Hawfinch. As it happens, the Greek word means "berry-breaker," which is exactly what the Chippewas at Sault Ste. Marie had been saying all along. ↗

"I wish I'd had a pair of these when I first started birding . . ."



SWIFT 8 x 42mm ULTRALITE

"Top-rated" in the binocular review in Cornell University's Autumn 1992 *Living Bird*, which said, "the best binocular for the buck. Birds look sharp and crisp . . . Their 21-ounce weight and armored coating make them the most comfortable Porro prism we examined. Amazingly, they were the only Porro prism binoculars to pass the fogging test. I wish I'd had a pair of these when I first started birding." A good 6.6° field (346' at 1000 yards), long 18mm eye relief ideal for eyeglass use; 14' close focus, a lifetime warranty – and our freight-paid price of \$217.50 saves you 37%!

Call (405) 364-4898 for our *free* catalog 93AB – with 8 pages of information about how to pick the right birding optics – plus our discount price list showing your savings on the 150 spotting scope and binocular models we keep in stock from Swift, Zeiss, Bausch & Lomb, Leica, Nikon, Pentax, Fujinon, Celestron, Questar, Kowa, Optolyth, Swarovski, and more.

christophers, ltd. 2401 Tee Circle, Suite 106
Norman, OK 73069

(405) 364-4898 Toll-free order/question/price quote line: (800) 356-6603

Hours: 10-5:00 CST, Mon. thru Fri. Mastercard, Visa, Amex, Discover, Optima. 3% handling on credit card orders

Our 14th year of saving you money on quality optics.

Members of the Bausch & Lomb Birding Council, National Audubon Society, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, American Birding Association, and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.