

## Evening Grosbeak *Coccothraustes vespertinus*



**Folk Name:** (none)

**Status:** Winter Visitor

**Abundance:** Rare/Erratic (irruptive)

**Habitat:** Pine and hardwood forest treetops, residential bird feeders

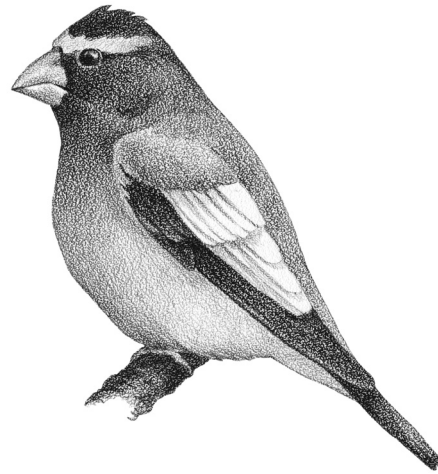
To some, the Evening Grosbeak looks like an “overgrown goldfinch.” Indeed, this boreal bird is the largest and most uniquely colored of our “winter finches.” It has a yellow forehead and eyebrow, a yellow body and undertail coverts, and a black tail and wings. It averages 8 inches long and is a full-bodied bird with a heavy yellowish bill. It has a white wing patch on its wings that is best seen when the bird is in flight. According to zoologist Harry LeGrand, Evening Grosbeaks “have a loud, one-syllabled ‘TEER’ call, that is not easily forgotten.”

The Evening Grosbeak is an “irruptive migrant” and as such, it is only occasionally seen in the Carolinas. These sporadic winter visitors to our area breed in the coniferous forests in the far north of our continent. They periodically “irrupt,” moving southward in large numbers during years when the cone crop is low.

The first Evening Grosbeaks ever documented in North Carolina were found in Chapel Hill and Salisbury during an irruption in 1922. W.C. Coker sighted a flock in Chapel Hill in March. Elmer Brown and E.M. Hoffman recorded a male and female on 25 March and another male on 1 April that year in Salisbury. This species was not seen again in North Carolina for 24 years until 1946, when they were recorded in six different Piedmont towns. Clara Knox submitted this account of her sighting in her backyard that year in Salisbury:



*Evening Grosbeak at feeder. (Taylor Piephoff)*



During the last two weeks in January, we have seen a large flock of strange birds feeding on the seeds of an ash and a maple in our yard. After a week (on January 23rd), I had a view near enough and clear enough to identify. After watching three of these birds from a window as they drank water in the gutter less than ten feet away, I brought out the books, and from the exact picture and description in “Birds of America,” I found the birds are Evening Grosbeaks! Have they ever been seen so far south before? They look very much like overgrown Goldfinches with a white band on their tail and large white spots on the wings. They have a “chip” something like the Cardinals, but sharper and not so loud. They “Chip” all together as Sparrows do.

During the winter of 1951–1952, the birds appeared in large numbers and were more widespread in North Carolina, and the first Evening Grosbeaks were recorded in South Carolina at Paris Mountain in Greenville County on November 21, 1951. That winter’s flight was summarized by Rhett Chamberlain in *The Chat* in June 1952. Evening Grosbeaks continued to be seen for the next several winters with an especially large influx noted in the winter of 1954–1955 and again in 1957–1958.

On March 2, 1952, Olin P. Wearn had a flock of more than 50 birds visit his feeders in downtown Charlotte. One visited the feeder of Mrs. J.L. McLean on December 26, 1954, and missed being tallied on the Charlotte Christmas Count by one day. A large flock spent the winter at the feeders of Mrs. James Mauney in New London in early 1958. Many of them lingered long enough to be counted on the Stanly Spring Bird Count held that year on 10 May.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Evening Grosbeaks

were reported with some regularity. Flocks of up to 200 were found in 1960 in several counties including: Mecklenburg, York, Cabarrus, Catawba, Union, Rowan, and Chester. Thirty-two were found on the Spring Bird Count in Stanly on April 30, 1960. H. Lee Jones found one still present in Charlotte as late as 6 May in 1960. During the winter of 1963–1964, there was another incursion of grosbeaks “of moderate proportions” that was again summarized in *The Chat* in September 1964 by Rhett Chamberlain. There were three reports from Mecklenburg County and one from Iredell County in 1965. David Wright reported seeing a flock of 30 in Charlotte on November 7, 1965, our earliest seasonal date recorded for this species. A single bird was reported from Kershaw in Lancaster County on May 11, 1966. A few were reported in Gastonia on November 24, 1968. Totals of 26 in Charlotte, 73 in Gastonia, 20 in Hickory, and 120 in Salisbury, were reported during the winter of 1969–1970. Mecklenburg Audubon members observed six on 2 May during the Charlotte Spring Bird Count in 1970. Caroline Martin photographed five at a feeder in Catawba County on November 24, 1972. Stanly Spring Bird Count participants tallied 247 on April 28, 1973.

Evening Grosbeaks were reported on every Christmas Bird Count from the region from 1969 to 1989 with the exceptions of 1970, 1982, 1984, and 1988. An amazing count of 600 Evening Grosbeaks was recorded on January 9, 1980, by ornithologist Doug McNair in the bottomlands of Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge in Anson County. This represents the peak count for the region.

Single birds were found on the Spring Bird Counts in 1980 in both Mecklenburg and Stanly County. The latest date for this species reported from the Carolinas is a bird seen on 19 May in South Carolina in 1982. A

modest irruptive flight peaked in February and March 1987 in the Carolinas. Bill Hilton Jr. banded a total of 31 Evening Grosbeaks in York County between January 21, 1994, and March 5, 1994. On March 15, 1995, Taylor Piephoff took the first voucher photograph of this species in Mecklenburg County at his backyard feeder in east Charlotte. Albert Conway reported a small flock of at least 15 in Chester from November 9, 1996, through January 14, 1997. One was recorded on the Anson CBC on January 4, 1998, and 23 were tallied on the count on January 2, 2000.

Sightings of the Evening Grosbeak in the Central Carolinas in the twenty-first century, have been quite sparse. The population of this charismatic species has been in decline since the 1980s due to habitat degradation and habitat loss on their breeding grounds. Quotations from recent issues of *The Chat* include: “This species has been present in extremely low numbers for many winters now,” and “[t]his species has just about ceased being a winter visitor to the Carolinas, with numbers steadily dwindling each season.”

Six were reported at the Reedy Creek Nature Center in Charlotte on April 7, 2002. One was seen at a feeder in Charlotte on February 17, 2004. One was seen at the feeders at the Latta Plantation Nature Center in Huntersville on December 13, 2006. Six were reported at Riverbend Park on October 29, 2007, and this number increased to close to 40 birds by 1 November. Individuals were reported in Lenoir and at St. Stephens Park in Hickory on November 15–16, 2012.

The Evening Grosbeak is listed on the Yellow Watch List of birds of the continental United States. It is a species with both “troubling” population declines and “high threats.” It is in need of conservation action.