

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

Species Notes: Rose-breasted Grosbeak

A Rose by Any Other Name ... Might be a Grosbeak!

"Judy, the saddest thing happened at my house the other day. I found a beautiful bird dead on my porch. It must have hit the window. I assume it was some kind of grosbeak because it had a beak like a cardinal. It was black and white. Do you know what kind it was?" ventured a colleague at work one spring day.

I was puzzled by her description. She insisted it had a white breast, black back and a beak like a cardinal. I told her I wasn't sure what it was. And then she volunteered the 'rest of the story'.

"It must have hit the window awfully hard and broke its neck. It even had some blood on its beautiful white breast."

"Ah Hah! It was a rose-breasted grosbeak," I said. "But that wasn't blood on its breast. The beautiful blood or rose red was actually part of his plumage!"

What a sad but wonderful treat to have such a magnificent bird in hand. Its beak is truly gross or large in size. It has to be to crack cherry and other fruit seeds. The male has the more striking plumage during the breeding season. To me he looks like he's dressed in a tuxedo with a broad red tie. His head is hooded in black. The black



continues down his back all the way to his tail. The wings are also black when he is sitting but when he flies he shows off a white rump and white patches on the wing. Underparts are pure white with a rose red bib on his upper breast. The wings are also lined with a rosey red wash. A stunning bird to see sitting or in flight.

The female on the other hand looks like a gigantic sparrow. She is heavily streaked with a rich, warm brown. There is a predominate white stripe above her eye and her wings will show two white wing bars. Other wise she is pretty nondescript. In the winter the male loses much of brilliance and looks a lot like the female. Actually he can look pretty odd because he will have the brown streaking of the female but still retain some of his red bib and the red under his wings.

These birds are not only good lookers but they are wonderful vocalists as well. I say they because both the male and female sing even from the nest. They have a beautiful clear, rolling song which will rival any thrush in our eastern woods. I remember hearing someone describe the song as being like a robin who has taken singing lessons. It is fuller and sweeter than a robin's but has the same musical, sing-song quality.

As beautiful as their song is it is their chip note that usually gives them away, especially in the fall. It is a loud, high-pitched, metallic 'chink'. It has been described as being similar to the sound of a sneaker on a gym floor. Once you hear it you won't forget it and it will help you find the birds as they move slowly through the tree tops eating blossoms and buds off the hickory, beech and white ash trees in our area.



Along with eating buds and blossoms the birds eat a wide variety of seeds and insects. Several important ones are the potato beetle, tent caterpillars and gypsy moths. They are mother nature's exterminators. In some areas they eat so many beetles early farmers named them the potato beetle bird.

So where should you look for this bird? Unfortunately it does not breed in the immediate area. They tend to like the cooler temperatures of the Carolina mountains. The Blue Ridge Parkway is a great place to see them because they like a combination of large deciduous trees and open areas with thick shrubs or brush. This habitat is abundant along the Parkway as well as around streams, ponds, overgrown pastures and even some residential areas in the mountains and further north on the Piedmont.

But don't be disheartened about not seeing them in your yard. During migration, from the middle of April through the middle of May and again in September, they eat their way through Mecklenburg county. They are seen regularly every spring at Latta Park in Dillworth (so if you live in that area check your trees as well). I saw my first one over at Reedy Creek Nature Preserve shortly after I moved here. And I have had them several times in the spring and fall in my yard. Several people have commented they have had them at their feeders for a day or so. It all depends on the weather.

They don't stay long but when they do appear it's magic.