



*A male Evening Grosbeak at Hartwick Pines State Park.
Photo by Greg Smith.*

THIS ISSUE

Adrian District Library, December 29

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An ‘Evening Grosbeak’ Winter

A state-threatened bird made an appearance in our yard over Thanksgiving weekend.

Hard to believe, but we’ve now occupied this swath of rural property north of Williamston for thirty-seven years. Yet, this is only the fourth time that I’ve spotted Evening Grosbeaks in the yard. Yup, the species is that unusual around these parts.

Although a bit smaller than an American Robin, by finch standards this is a very large bird. It occupies the same family (Fringillidae) as the familiar feeder-visiting American Goldfinch and House Finch. Since it sports similar colors some birders, tongue-in-cheek, call it a ‘goldfinch on steroids.’

The gargantuan seed-cracking-tool that passes for a beak on the Evening Grosbeak takes up an outsized portion of its overall head size; a feature very in-line with what’s attached to the noggin of your basic backyard cardinal. Although the Northern Cardinal - in nineteenth-century parlance, the ‘Cardinal Grosbeak’ - has been assigned to a different passerine family (Cardinalidae, shared with other grosbeaks, buntings) the common form and function of their beaks is undeniable.

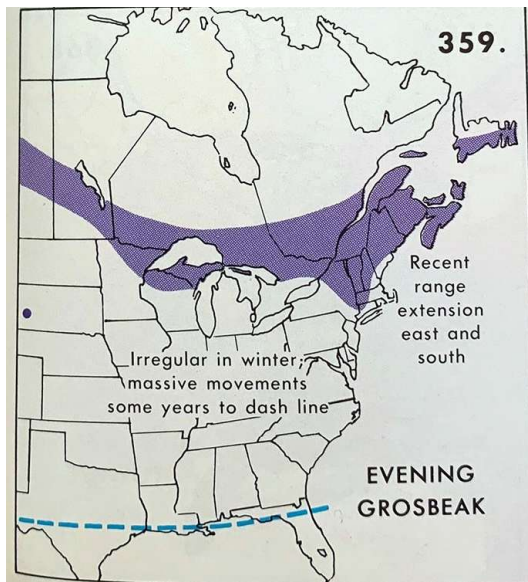
The Evening Grosbeak breeds within North America’s Coniferous Forest Biome (a.k.a, boreal forest, taiga), a wide ribbon that extends across southern Canada from coast to coast. It is bordered to the north by the Tundra Biome and to the south in the eastern portion of the continent by the Deciduous Forest Biome. Boreal forests seep across the U.S. border into portions of our most northerly states.



Female Evening Grosbeak. Photo by Greg Smith.

In Michigan, the Upper Peninsula and northern third of the Lower Peninsula comprise the biome's southern edge. Although uncommon, Evening Grosbeaks can be found breeding here in scattered locations. In the Lower Peninsula, Hartwick Pines State Park, a bit north of Grayling, is a well-known and, thus far, reliable spot to find them. We've seen them - often cued by their chirpy calls - as they pass through the campground treetops. They can also be found seeking sunflower seeds at bird feeders outside the visitor center windows.

During the breeding season Evening Grosbeaks forage for protein in the form of insect matter, largely lepidopteran larvae, to feed their young. The degree of nesting success is correlated to annual densities of the cyclic Spruce Budworm Moth, the larvae of which can severely defoliate trees in peak outbreak years. In such summers Evening Grosbeak reproductive success tends to be exceptionally good.



From Peterson Guide to Birds of Eastern & Central North America.

Outside the breeding season Evening Grosbeaks are largely consumers of seeds and fruits that are produced by a variety of deciduous and coniferous trees throughout the boreal forest. However, the degree of seed production from year to year is also cyclic. In most years seed availability in the boreal forests is sufficient to feed roving flocks of Evening Grosbeaks throughout the winter. Conversely, in winters that follow summers of low seed/fruit production, the grosbeaks are impelled to move further south to forage than they otherwise would, sometimes deep into the Deciduous Forest Biome well south of Michigan.

These sporadic southward movements are termed 'irruptions.' In the lower half of the state most winters produce no irruptive movement of Evening Grosbeaks; hence, explaining the scarcity of sightings here over almost four decades. The most recent one prior to this occurred over the winter of 2020-21 – an especially explosive Evening Grosbeak irruptive event.

Somewhat ironically, learning about the Evening Grosbeak's grim recent history of decline serves to up the ante in terms of excitement when a sighting does occur. Populations are known to have plummeted over ninety percent since the 1970s. The species was cited in 2016 by *Partners in Flight* (<https://partnersinflight.org/>) as the steepest declining landbird in the continental U.S. and Canada.

Researchers are particularly suspect of the Canadian government's ongoing widespread spraying programs meant to reduce or eliminate Spruce Budworm outbreaks. These insecticides, btw, are hardly specific to this species. Lepidopteran larvae of all species are eliminated wherever they are applied. Deforestation, the effects of accelerating climate change, and of course, the associated uptick in forest fires, are further crippling the survivorship of its occupants.

At first it might seem a stroke of luck that I spotted this small, transient flock from The North in our yard at all seeing they never came to our feeders; but as is often said, *You make your own luck*. Here's how it happened...

Mid-Sunday morning, as the overnight snow event that had dumped some six inches over the area finally subsided, the activity at the bird feeders outside the large east-facing nature center window was aptly booming. Several dozen individuals of at least a dozen species came, fed, and went in fitful continuity. As I worked at various aspects of the daily maintenance required for our in-house zoo of Michigan-native reptiles and amphibians, my gaze inexorably drifted time and again to the activity outside the pane.

On one such gander my eyes focused on an approaching object in the gloomy sky far behind the feeding station. To the east and closing, a Red-tailed Hawk glided in a straight path from the back of our acreage not far above the trees directly toward the yard.

The tree line on our back lawn's east edge happens to contain several Boxelders of various heights. A dioecious species, it is easy to tell the Boxelder sexes apart in winter. The branches of the male trees are bare, but the outermost branches of the females at this time of year are loaded with clusters of dried, brown-winged seeds, or samaras. The hawk's path took it directly over the crown of one particularly large, seed-laden Boxelder then through the air space above the snow-blanketed lawn.

Unlike a Cooper's Hawk, a Red-tailed Hawk has neither the agility nor inclination to chase fleet-flying songbirds. As the hawk glided over the Boxelder, though, some eight-or-so birds flushed in unison from its upper branches into the air directly below it. They quickly vanished out of sight over the roof of the house.

In the dreary light any attempt at identification would have been sketchy. All color and markings on the birds were effectively obscured – gray forms silhouetted against a gray backdrop. Yet, given their size I suspected/hoped they might be Evening Grosbeaks.

Only seconds after the gliding hawk, too, disappeared over the roof, first one bird then two more circled back to return to the Boxelder. Several more joined them a few seconds later.

I grabbed my binoculars and focused on the tree through the windowpane. Grosbeaks confirmed! I quickly set up and adjusted the spotting scope on the tripod for an ultra-close view. Shifting the lens from one bird to the next the bright males stood out from the more muted females. Some merely perched and rested. Others plucked individual samaras then maneuvered mandibles to extract the single seed from within.



Boxelder seeds are a common winter food for Evening Grosbeaks in Lower Michigan.

Since Evening Grosbeaks are attracted to sunflower seed most folks become aware of the birds when a flock suddenly descends upon their bird feeders. Although these birds were high in a tree on the far side of the lawn, the busy feeders outside our nature center window were definitely in their line of sight.

I continued to work, albeit, with even more copious looks out the window to see if they might join the catered feast. Minutes later, amid one such gander I spotted one of the female grosbeaks perched at the top of our Japanese Maple - a mere thirty feet above and behind the feeding station. She had noticed! As she perched, I imagined she was contemplating whether it was safe to fly to feeders positioned so closely to the windows. The other members of the flock were still in the Boxelder. Would they follow her lead?

I turned my gaze away from the window for only a few seconds. When I looked back she was gone. Assuming she had rejoined the birds in the Boxelder I looked toward the tree again. The seedy branches, too, were now bare of birds. I watched for the grosbeaks' return throughout the day then over ensuing days, but to no avail.

Truth be told, for a week or more prior to the encounter I had been anticipating the possibility of Evening Grosbeaks passing through the yard. It was, indeed, anticipation that had prompted me to look more closely at these particular, distant, nondescript birds. I owe the anticipation to *eBird*.



In eastern Mason County over Thanksgiving weekend Julia Chambers prepares to release an Evening Grosbeak, once it had revived after a collision with a window.

If you haven't yet, check out *eBird* (<https://ebird.org/home>), a user site and continuously-growing database coordinated by Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. Navigate to the state of Michigan then to Ingham or any county of your choice to check out recently reported local birds.

I signed up to receive daily 'Michigan rare bird alerts' from *eBird*. Every morning a taxonomically-arranged list appears in my inbox: unusual species encountered by birders across the state over the previous twenty-four hours. Among other information the list includes the county where the species was encountered, then a link featuring a GPS map along with a pin indicating the subject's exact location.

Perusing daily alerts prior to Thanksgiving, I noticed Evening Grosbeak reports popping up in several southerly counties to our west and to the east. Naturally, I interpreted the sightings as a possible prelude to at least a moderately irruptive winter. The reports served to whet an impetus, as well, for heightened awareness of activity around our yard.

I posted my find on *eBird*, and it appeared on the rare bird alert the following day; the first Evening Grosbeak sighting for Ingham County this year... but, I have a feeling, certainly not the last.

Keep your eyes and ears open. A roving flock of Evening Grosbeaks could show up anywhere. Put sunflower seed out to enhance the odds. They are also quite vocal, and their calls are distinctive. Through years of experience, I've often heard their shrill, raspy chirps first, prompting me to then look in their direction. You can listen to the calls on this link:

<https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/evening-grosbeak>

For more about the Evening Grosbeak check out this informative article:

<https://northernwoodlands.org/articles/article/save-fastest-declining-landbird>

...and these links from the Finch Research Network that discuss irruptive movements of the Evening Grosbeak and other boreal species:

<https://finchnetwork.org/winter-finch-forecast-2025-2026>

https://finchnetwork.org/help-firn-continue-evening-grosbeak-purple-finch-and-red-crossbill-work-across-north-america?mc_cid=804d9f4690&mc_eid=6e15d2cc9b

- Jim McGrath

Around the State in December...

Adrian District Library

'Michigan Wildlife Potpourri'

Monday, December 29; 4-5:30pm

<https://adrian.lib.mi.us/Activities/Activity/Detail/Kids-Programs-2025-711>



Nature Discovery

5900 N. Williamston Road Williamston, MI 48895
517.655.5349 naturedisc87@gmail.com www.naturediscovery.net



*Visit Our
Nature Center
by Appointment
Over the Holidays
Suggested Minimum
Donation: \$5/person/hr*

Looking for a unique destination for a small group of family/friends over the holidays? The sky's the limit for entertaining natural science experiences here – with a Michigan twist! Schedule an intimate visit to what we call “The Biggest Little Nature Center in Michigan,” and “Home to the Largest Zoo of Michigan-native Reptiles and Amphibians.” The unique hands-on experiences here are unrivaled at any other nature center or zoo! We will bring snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders out of tanks to interact with adults or students of any age or grade-level.

Identify and feed sixteen Michigan turtles of all sizes. Meet, pet and feed “Milberta”, our always hungry Red-footed tortoise.

Visit ten species of Michigan snakes on hand here while learning about their identification, behavior and habitat needs. Watch them gobble up worms, fish or even mice. Hold or “wear” a gentle 6-foot Black Ratsnake – the largest in the state!



A screech-owl is spotlighted in the yard.

View the bustling bird feeders right outside the window. Take a guided winter walk on our trails to identify birds, trees, vines, and invasive plants.

Ask about arranging a **special evening visit**. Weather-permitting we can step outside and attempt to attract a wild screech-owl with recordings.

Contact us for additional information or to make an appointment most any day or evening.

Nature Discovery

5900 N. Williamston Road Williamston, MI 48895
517.655.5349 naturedisc87@gmail.com www.naturediscovery.net

By Appointment Over the Holidays... Go “Owling” at Nature Discovery



Schedule a 90 minute appointment for your small group (recommended max. 8) to visit **almost any evening after dusk**, and we'll attempt to draw a *wild owl* in for a close-encounter!

The evening begins with Powerpoint images and recordings to help you become familiar with Screech, Great-horned and Barred Owls - the three permanent residents found in Lower Michigan. Learn about six other species - migrants from Canada - that drift southward into our area to hunt for prey over the winter, including where to go to see them.



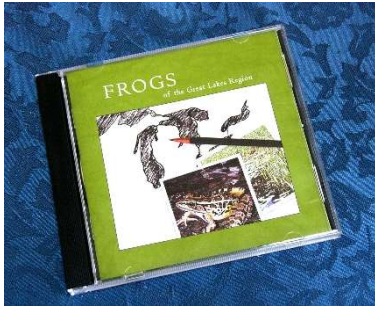
Then, we will go out the back door into the darkness to try to get one to respond to recordings. If an owl comes close we will attempt to spotlight it for viewing. Bring binoculars and a camera if you have them.

Before or after the owling experience visitors may also wish to view and interact with specimens from our huge zoo of Michigan-native reptiles & amphibians.

Base suggested donation: \$100.

Do you live in a rural area? Arrangements can also be made to have this program come to you whereby you may get a chance to meet your own neighborhood owl face to face. Contact us for details or to make an appointment, here or there.

Note: The likelihood of attracting an owl is diminished in windy or precipitating conditions. If possible, arrange to schedule a visit after confirming a favorable weather forecast. If you schedule a date further in advance, feel free to cancel and reschedule on short notice if the forecast calls for poor conditions. This activity is not recommended for young children.



Give a *natural* gift this season

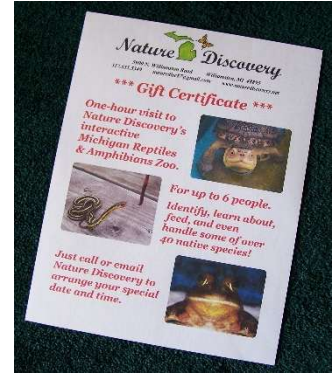
“FROGS OF THE GREAT LAKES REGION”

Instructional and environmental listening featuring our own original recordings of the breeding calls of 13 native species compiled from wetland habitats across the state. Load the app onto a phone or tablet! \$15. Check our website for details.

NATURE DISCOVERY GIFT CERTIFICATES

A guided experience for adults, couples, or families at our nature center located north of Williamston. Base rate is \$40/hr. Upon payment we will email you a certificate to print and present to the recipient.

Gift certificates are also available for outdoor guided functions for adults and families, i.e., interpretive walks or birding outings at local natural areas, an “owling” night, etc. Contact us for details or to discuss more ideas.



During this holiday season we wish to extend a heartfelt ‘Thank you’ to all our supporters, including these most recent donors...

*Will Gold * Jan Heminger
Matt Johnstone * Joyce Peterson * David Pruden*

Eve of dawn at the back pond.

Join Us... Demand NO MORE Plastics, Autocrats

Peeling Back the Curtain on Big Plastic's False Solutions

https://insideclimatenews.org/news/01122025/judith-enck-big-plastics-book/?utm_source=InsideClimate+News&utm_campaign=928836714c-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2025_12_06_11_13&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_29c928ffb5-928836714c-327904609

The Dirty Truth About Clean Teeth

https://earth911.com/health/guest-idea-the-dirty-truth-about-clean-teeth/?utm_source=ActiveCampaign&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Podcast%3A+Sustainable+Starfish-Based+De-Icer+%7C+COP30+Concludes+Without+A+Roadmap+%7C+The+Truth+About+Clean+Teeth+%7C+Recycle+Cookware+%7C+Help+The+World&utm_campaign=Earth911+Newsletter%3A+November+21%2C+2025+%28Copy%29

The 360+ members of the Steady State are former national security officials who remain committed to their oaths to “defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic.”

<https://thesteadystate.org/>

Accelerating Authoritarian Dynamics: Assessment of Democratic Decline

<https://steadystate1.substack.com/p/accelerating-authoritarian-dynamics>

-JM

The next generation would be justified in looking back at us and asking, “What were you thinking? Couldn’t you hear what the scientists were saying? Couldn’t you hear what Mother Nature was screaming at you?” -Al Gore

I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act like you would in a crisis. I want you to act like your house is on fire, because it is. - Greta Thunberg

The personal actions that cut climate pollution fast are to go flight-, car-, and meat-free. Start with the one that feels most feasible for you; if you can’t totally go without, aim to cut your consumption today at least in half. – Kimberly Nicholas, Under the Sky We Make

What if we had storytelling mechanisms that said it is important that you know about the well-being of wildlife in your neighborhood? –Robin Wall Kimmerer

Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you. – Frank Lloyd Wright

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Concerned Scientists**
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