

Bird Notes by Rick Pyeritz

*When shadows that no will can drive away
Entomb me – then no sermon blesseth day,
More true and sweet than that pure note
My ear hath caught afloat,
Aflame from the rose-breast's fervent throat.*

*The world is wide 'twixt man and worlds divine,
And hearts are dull to such a song as thine;
But I have heard. Sing on, from tree to tree,
As thou hast sung to me-
And more shall find the God that guideth thee!*

from To a Grosbeak in the Garden
by Ivan Swift



The day began like any other that week in March 1992. Up at dawn; unfurl the 15 mist nets across East Ship Island, a wilderness island of the Gulf Island National Seashore, then wait for the weary, energy depleted trans-gulf migrants to tangle themselves into one of the nets. Walking net to net was exciting because you never knew what species of bird you might find entwined in the fine cotton fibers. After carefully untangling birds from the net, we placed them in a carrying case designed to hold 8 birds, each in their separate compartment. (see picture below). When full, we brought the birds to a screened tent where we measured and weighed the

bird, determined body fat percentage, then placed a metal band around one of the bird's legs. The band had an identifying number on it unique to that bird. The number was recorded and filed at a facility in Maryland. *

As I reached my hand through one of the swinging doors of the carrying case I had no premonition that I was about to have a painful encounter with the bird responsible for my life-long interest in birds. The pain in my right index finger was something I did not expect. I could not withdraw my hand from the box because a Rose-breasted Grosbeak was firmly attached to the tip of my finger by its rather large bill. After a few minutes of painful maneuvering, I was able to safely extricate the bird and my bloody finger from the box. The experience vividly reminded me of the first Grosbeak I saw as a high school student. That sighting more than any other (made after 20 minutes of fighting through briars ---another painful experience) spurred my interest in birds.



It was not until later years that I first heard its song. As described by Frank Chapman...

“There is an exquisite purity in the joyous carol of the Grosbeak; his song tells of all the gladness of a May morning; I have heard few happier strains of bird-music. With those who are deaf to its message of good cheer I can only sympathize, pitying the man whose heart does not leap with enthusiasm at the sight of rival males dashing through the woods like winged meteors, leaving in their wake a train of sparkling notes.”

The Grosbeak is one of the few birds which will sing at night, especially when the moon is full. Audubon wrote about its song while camped on the banks of the Mohawk River in New York,

“The evening was calm and beautiful, the sky sparkled with stars. The thoughts of my worldly mission then came over my mind, and having thanked the Creator of all for his never-failing mercy, I closed my eyes, and was passing away into the world of dreaming existence, when suddenly there burst on my soul the serenade of the Rose-breasted bird, so rich, so mellow, so loud in the stillness of the night, that sleep fled from my eyelids. Never did I enjoy the music more: it thrilled through my heart and surrounded me with an atmosphere of bliss.”

The Rose-breasted Grosbeak is a common summer resident of the Southern Appalachians nesting around 3200 to 5000 feet. During migration it can be found throughout the southern mountains. Its presence revealed by its metallic call note –*peenk*.

Neltje Blanchan in her book, Bird Neighbors, notes that the farmers of Pennsylvania call the Grosbeak the potato-bug bird since it is more useful to their crop than all the insecticides known. Perhaps they also enjoy the song of the Rose-breasted Grosbeak.



Comments and/or questions---send to eapyeritz@gmail.com .

**If you find a banded bird you can report it at <www.reportband.gov> The U.S. Geologic Survey's Pawtuxet Bird Banding Lab will send you a certificate of appreciation that includes information about the sex, age, species and when and where the bird was banded.*