

Nature Buzz
by Terri Treacy

Rose-breasted Grosbeak

I'm continually running into people who have seen an unusual bird at their feeder or critter in their yard. They either want to know what it is they're seeing, or they already know and are simply excited to talk about it. Therein lay the impetus for this article – and possibly a regular feature about the interesting guests that visit our yards.

The buzz this month has been the handsome black and white bird with the bright red patch. It is the adult male rose-breasted grosbeak (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*) in breeding or spring plumage. The female is the same size, but her plumage is reminiscent of a sparrow – brown above and streaky below, with a distinctive white stripe from the eye down to the neck.

Rose-breasted grosbeaks spend the winter in the tropical highlands of southern Mexico, Central America and northern South America in open woodlands, clearings and plantations. By late March to early April they are ready to return home to the northeastern United States and most of Canada to raise their families. The Mississippi Flyway is their major migration route, making southernmost Illinois a favorite place to rest and feed before continuing the final leg of their long journey. They begin showing up here towards the end of April, will feed for a couple weeks, with most birds having moved on by mid-May.

Although most of Illinois is home to these beautiful birds, there are scant records of any breeding pair this far south. Breeding records do indicate however that their range in Illinois has been steadily moving southward, so someday we might be lucky enough to have them nest here in Pope County.

As migrants at your feeder you'll notice their voracious appetite for sunflower and safflower seeds and peanuts. Away from the feeder they dine on elm, catalpa and fox tail seeds, as well as buds from several different plants. They also depend on wild fruits such as elderberry and wild cherry, and insects such as grasshoppers, beetles and moths. In fact their appetite for Colorado potato beetles is so great that in some parts of the country people call the birds the potato-bug bird.

The song of the rose-breasted grosbeak is the one of the loveliest you'll hear. It has been described as sounding like a robin that has had voice lessons. For many species the male is the primary vocalist, but with the rose-breasted grosbeak both the male and the female sing. Observers have noted that during courtship these birds seem truly fond of one another, often gently touching beaks like a sweet kiss.

The female, often with the help of the male, builds the nest five to fifteen feet high in thickets or small deciduous trees. The nest is a somewhat flimsy structure loosely woven with small sticks and twigs, coarse straw, and lined with grasses, rootlets, and often horse hair.

Three to five greenish-blue eggs with brown spots are laid between May and July. Incubation, shared by both parents, takes twelve to thirteen days. Both parents tend to the feeding duties of the newly hatched chicks, providing meals of berries and insects.

In 1932, T.S. Roberts observed both parents sharing feeding duties in half-hour intervals. During one of the male's turns at feeding he came and went 28 times in 30 minutes, always bringing elderberries from a nearby bush. At other times the parents returned to the nest delivering a beak full of insects, followed immediately by regurgitating a considerable amount of insects that had been concealed in the gullet. This is obviously a bird you would love to have nesting near your garden.

The young are ready to fledge the nest after nine to ten days, but they don't master the art of flying for another five to six days, nor do they attain adult size for several days after that. At this point, the parents, who have continued to provide food for the young, begin teaching them the finer skills of seed cracking and fruit and insect foraging. By early to mid-August the juveniles are ready to make their first journey to the tropics.

By the time you read this most of the grosbeaks will have moved on, but you can look forward to their return next year. Also, look for migrants heading south for the winter as they pass through our area in early September. They may not be as noticeable however, because the males have already molted into their duller, brownish winter plumage, and they tend to not linger at the feeders as they do in spring.

The rose-breasted grosbeak is a very special bird, for its stunning appearance, its melodious song, and the service it provides by eating up pesky garden insects. To make sure we enjoy this bird for generations to come we need to conserve its habitat both here and in the tropics and reduce our dependence on agricultural pesticides.

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