

Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch

Leucosticte tephrocotis



BY LORI MICKEN

Winter officially begins for me when a flock of gray-crowned rosy-finches arrives. I live near the base of Bozeman Pass, at 5,500 feet elevation. Each year in late November or early December, a large flock descends from the high mountains to spend winter in my yard, attracted to my nine bird feeders and nearby trees and creeks.

Gray-crowned rosy-finches are sometimes found in large flocks of over 1,000 individuals, though the flocks that come to my yard are never so big. Some years a flock with only 50 birds visits. But for some reason the number last winter was a record 500-plus birds. To make counts, I photograph the flock in a tree, then count the birds in the picture.

If we have a few warm days in winter, the flock vanishes, only to reappear when snow or cold returns. In March the birds migrate back to higher elevations for breeding. That's when I know winter is finally over.

DESCRIPTION The gray-crowned rosy-finch is a handsome little bird the size of a

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house sparrow. The body is a warm cinnamon-brown, the head is mostly gray with a dark throat and forecrown, and wings are gray, black, and pink. Males have a pink rump and belly, but coloration varies widely among different birds. Females generally have less pink and are lighter colored. The sturdy beaks of both sexes are yellow, and feet and legs are black.

Montana has two subspecies of gray-crowned rosy-finch: the coastal (gray-cheeked or Hepburn's) and the interior. The Hepburn's subspecies has gray covering the entire neck, while the interior's neck is cinnamon-brown. I have observed an increase in the Hepburn's subspecies through the years, but they still constitute only a small percentage of the flock that frequents my backyard.

DISTRIBUTION AND HABITAT Gray-crowned rosy-finches live in all but the most northern parts of Alaska, through western-most Canada, and south through the Cascades and Rockies. In Montana they summer high in the mountains from the Idaho border east to the Little Belts and Crazyes. The birds usually stay above tree line at elevations up to 11,000 feet, in tundra, rocky summits, cirques, and snowfield edges. In winter they descend to lower elevations to

escape the continuous snowpack and then spread throughout much of the state.

REPRODUCTION Rosy-finches are not as gregarious during breeding season as in winter. But sometimes they can be found nesting in small groups in prime breeding areas. In crevices of cliffs and talus among glaciers and snowfields, they build nests of grass, lichen, and moss lined with feathers and fine grasses. The three to five eggs are white.

BEHAVIOR Some field guides say these birds hop; others say they walk. I have observed them doing both. Gray-crowned rosy-finches are ground foragers, living on seeds as well as wind-blown insects they find in grass or caught on the edges of snowfields. They readily visit elevated bird feeders.

The birds are quite tame, perhaps owing to their remote breeding sites and rare human contact. But the flock often startles, moving away in unison, their wingbeats creating a din audible from inside the house. Usually one to several birds remain, diligently eating, only glancing up at the retreating birds. The others then return one at a time until the entire flock roars back and starts feeding again. I've seen a flock consume a gallon of birdseed in half an hour.

People have long expressed an affinity for gray-crowned rosy-finches, perhaps because of the birds' pinkish coloration, gregarious nature, or tolerance for human presence. A 1937 bird book describes them as "optimistic little creatures living the gospel of, 'come storm or sunshine, all is well.'"

CONSERVATION According to results of the annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count, Montana's gray-crowned rosy-finch population is declining. "Climate change is suspected, because alpine habitats are one of the first to feel the effects of a warming climate," says Catherine Wightman, bird conservation specialist with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. "Breeding habitat for rosy-finches and other alpine breeders is becoming more limited." Despite these concerns, the gray-crowned rosy-finch remains a denizen of many backyards throughout the winter and, for me, a delightful harbinger of both winter and spring. 🐾