

# Pine grosbeak

*Pinicola enucleator* By Shane Sater

A clear, querulous *quee-queet* rings out from a snow-covered mountain ash tree, where several sleek, plump pine grosbeaks feed on wrinkled berries. They eat the seeds and drop the skin and pulp, peppering the snow underneath with orange flecks. These dapper birds are hardy residents of Montana's high country and the boreal forest of the far north. The boreal birds winter as far north as the Arctic Circle; in the rare year when they "irrupt" (show up in large numbers) in our lowlands, they bring the essence of the spruce-fir woods to our doorsteps.

## IDENTIFICATION

The pine grosbeak is a robin-size finch with a trim, handsome coat of gray body feathers. The tail is charcoal, as are the wings, which have white bars. First-year birds and older females bear a modest touch of yellow or red on the forehead and rump. Males molt into their striking adult plumage after their first birthday, sporting a bright red head, back, and breast.

## SOUNDS

To stay in touch, flock members use loud flight calls, which differ between mountain and boreal populations. Montana's mountain grosbeaks give a tremulous *quee-queet*, while the boreal birds whistle a soft *pew pew*. Birds stick with others that share the same flight call. When foraging close together, flock members use short, soft contact calls: *pip pip*. During summer in the mountains, males sing a rich, cheerful warble from treetops.

## HABITAT

In summer, look for pine grosbeaks in high-elevation spruce-fir forests near openings and wet areas. In winter, pine grosbeaks move to lower elevations, feeding along shrubby creeks or visiting seed- or fruit-bearing trees in town.

## REPRODUCTION

No one has ever documented a pine grosbeak nest in Montana, likely because the habitat is so remote and evergreen needles are so dense. But singing males and fledged young suggest that the species breeds in mountain ranges as far east as the Pryors. June is when female pine grosbeaks use conifer twigs to build well-hidden nests in subalpine forests. Based on observations in other states, the nests are bulky cups of twigs placed on a conifer branch near the trunk, from 6 to 20 feet up. Females incubate three to five pale blue, speckled eggs for about two weeks. Both parents feed the hungry young, delivering a rich paste of insects and plant matter in special pouches in their lower jaw.

## DIET

Though the rapidly growing young eat mostly insects and spiders, adults are primarily vegetarian, consuming tree buds, seeds, and berries. Pine grosbeaks are social birds that feed in small flocks for much of the year. They use a surprising variety of foraging techniques, feeding from the ground to treetops. The wide range of plant foods in their diet includes conifer buds and tender new needles, seeds of roadside weeds like burdock, maple tree seeds often called "whirlees" or "helicopters," sunflower seeds at bird feeders, and a variety of berries from mountain ash and other trees and shrubs.

## CONSERVATION

Uncommon across a vast swath of northern forests, pine grosbeak populations are hard



## SCIENTIFIC NAME

*Pinicola* is Latin for "pine dweller." An *enucleator* removes the nucleus from a cell, a reference to the way pine grosbeaks remove pit seeds from berries of mountain ash and other fruit trees and shrubs.

to monitor. As a result, biologists know little about their population trends. The annual Breeding Bird Survey suggests rangewide decreases but does not cover much of the breeding habitat. Warming global temperatures will likely shrink the species' breeding habitat. Wintering range is expected to shrink less substantially but will shift northward over the next half-century. In the future, observing pine grosbeaks in Montana may become even more of a treat than it is now. 🐿️

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