



Male Evening Grosbeak. Photo credit: Annie McLeod

EVENING GROSBEAKS

FEEDING ON PUPAE OF THE FOREST TENT CATERPILLAR IN THE DUNE-RIDGE FOREST, DELTA MARSH, MANITOBA, SPRING 1976

Spencer G. Sealy
 Department of Biological Sciences
 University of Manitoba
 Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2
 Spencer.Sealy@umanitoba.ca

During the summer of 1975, moths of the Forest Tent Caterpillar (*Malacosoma distria* Hbn.) laid eggs in the narrow dune-ridge forest that separates Lake Manitoba and Delta Marsh, Manitoba (50°11'N, 98°19'W).¹ This infestation was more visible the following year when the larval caterpillars caused extensive defoliation throughout

the ridge forest. Fewer caterpillars were detected in 1977, and defoliation was patchy.² It was part of a broader outbreak of Forest Tent Caterpillars documented across the Canadian Prairie Provinces, which was recorded initially in the early 1970s.³ Larval caterpillars were detected in the ridge forest only in 1976 and 1977, during ongoing studies of the breeding ecology of birds in this habitat. Black-billed Cuckoos (*Coccyzus erythrophthalmus*), Bay-breasted Warblers (*Setophaga castanea*), and Baltimore Orioles (*Icterus galbula*)

enhanced their reproductive success in response to the sudden availability of this abundant insect prey in the ridge forest.^{2,4,5} One pair of Evening Grosbeaks (*Coccothraustes vespertinus*) was observed feeding on pupae of the tent caterpillar during the breeding season in 1976. This was the only year this species was recorded in this season during the more than 35 years (1974-2010) in which we worked in the ridge forest. On June 18, 1976, two adult Evening Grosbeaks, a male and female, were perched about 2 m apart and about 3 m high

in a defoliated Manitoba Maple (*Acer negundo*). They frequently uttered "soft calls", similar to those described previously.⁶ Each bird consumed at least two pupae during 15 minutes of observation, but when I returned to the site a few hours later, both birds were gone and the species was not observed again despite a thorough search for a nest in the ensuing days.

The Evening Grosbeak is known to respond to outbreaks of spruce budworm (*Choristoneura fumiferana* (Clem.)) and other caterpillar larvae⁷, but predation reported here added another species to the list of predators on the Forest Tent Caterpillar.⁸

We did not observe Evening Grosbeaks in the ridge forest prior to the breeding season in 1976, but single females were recorded in other years: May 11, 1982, May 12, 1984, and May 25, 1986, and a flock of four (two pairs of adults) was observed by Daniel M. Guinan on May 6, 1981. These dates coincide with late dates of departure from the wintering areas.^{6,9} Evening Grosbeaks were not observed at any time in spring or summer in the ridge forest in subsequent years.

Observations beyond the ridge forest at Delta Marsh shed little light on the movements and breeding of Evening Grosbeaks in the region, although Winnipeg Christmas Bird Counts were in the hundreds during the 1970s, with a peak recorded in 1976.⁹

The observation of a single pair of Evening Grosbeaks, regardless of the species' propensity to move widely in search of food at various times of the year⁷, by no means confirms that the one-time appearance of a pair of Evening Grosbeaks in the ridge forest in late spring was a response to the presence of tent caterpillars, or that it was a coincidence. Most larval caterpillars had pupated

by the time the grosbeaks were observed,^{4,5} and it was this stage of the insect's life cycle on which the birds fed. This pair or other pairs of Evening Grosbeaks may have nested undetected elsewhere in the ridge forest, although we routinely covered more than 20 km of the ridge forest in our work each year, including in 1976. The Evening Grosbeak's mobility and known propensity to respond to outbreaks of budworms during the breeding season prompted me to document this occurrence in late spring in the dune-ridge forest at Delta Marsh.

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POETRY

A Change of Season

A gray spring day
somber bleached grasses
motionless
patched with grimy snow
ridges of it
crumbly blackness.

The background sky
uniform dark slate
lowering
scrawls of dry trees mark
bottom edges
one vast stillness.

Victor C. Friesen

P.O. Box 65
Rosthern, SK S0K 3R0
victorcfrisen@yahoo.com

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