



Winter is approaching; both Karen and I are feeling a sense of anticipation and excitement as we put up and fill our backyard feeders. We always increase the number of feeders available for birds during the winter, and we know our feed bill may increase considerably when the winter finches arrive and then empty those feeders as fast as we can fill them. Species like Pine Siskins and Red-breasted Nuthatches are reliable annual visitors to our yard. Common Redpolls have appeared six out of the last eight years. But we also live in hope that other, scarcer species will appear, like maybe a Hoary Redpoll, a flock of Evening Grosbeaks, one of the two species of crossbills, or even Pine Grosbeaks. Some may say our wish list is dreaming in Technicolor...but you never know.

When's the last time you had Evening Grosbeaks at your backyard bird feeders? Or perhaps they've never made an appearance? Karen and I vividly remember the last time

Reflections on backyard birding throughout Illinois

by Robert Fisher

we spotted a lone female eating the sunflower seeds spread on our back deck railing. It was 11 November, 1999, almost nine years ago as I write this. We were able to alert a number of Chicago area birders via phone calls, so a lot of people got to see her before she disappeared the next day.

Evening Grosbeaks are surely one of the most sought-after winter finch species around Illinois today. Sightings are few and far between; in some recent winters none were seen anywhere in our state. Their recent rarity is a bit disappointing since they were regular visitors (sometimes in large numbers) to bird feeders in our state from the 70s up through the mid 80s. Why the decline? The most prevalent theory: Huge outbreaks of spruce budworms in the boreal forest provided a great food source for this species during their breeding season. This in turn led to a large increase in population, and nomadic flocks roamed widely in search of food during the fall and winter, sometimes arriving (and staying) until every last sunflower seed had been eaten. As the size and severity of those spruce budworm outbreaks diminished, so did the numbers of Evening Grosbeaks, though the population in eastern North America appears to be stable.

Karen and I have a somewhat less scientific take on why we're not seeing or hearing this spectacular species these days. We blame their absence on an increase in well-stocked sunflower feeders in our neighboring state to the

north. Wisconsin feeder watchers are short-stopping our birds! I'm seriously thinking of writing a complaint letter to the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology.

Though we're unlikely to entice Evening Grosbeaks down this way, another winter finch is almost certain to appear as winter approaches—Pine Siskins. These feisty little thistle/nyger gobblers will be squabbling with the resident American. Goldfinches for the prime spots on many thistle bags or upside down feeders. When not at a feeder scarfing down thistle, Pine Siskins frequently glean seeds out in open weedy fields, or dangle on birch and alder branches, feeding on their catkins. For a few years in northeastern Illinois, you could reliably find siskins eating the river alder seeds as this non-native tree species spreads along various small rivers, creeks, and ponds. For some reason, the siskins have been less prone to do that recently, but they continue to utilize hemlocks during those winters when this tree species produces lots of cones. The aptly named Hemlock Hill at the Morton Arboretum has always been a reliable spot for Pine Siskins.

And it's always worthwhile to search through those siskin flocks (at your feeders or in the field). One or more of them may prove to be a redpoll! Common (and Hoary) Redpolls usually stay in the very far north during the winter, specializing on white and yellow birch seeds, a high energy food source. Birch seed crops are