

The Colors of the Fire

Heading into what we hope is the end of one of the coldest winters on record in Minnesota, this weekend I spent some time rejoicing outside due to a sudden moderation in temperatures. The snow banks are still plenty deep, but on Saturday I had 20 degrees at my house, and I was not about to waste that happy occasion! Sunday was even better, with temp's in the 40's. Tin roofs were unloading, the ice dams were finally 'ripe' for harvest, and the calico cat emerged from her shelter in the barn long enough for us to enjoy a cup of tea together on the front steps.

For the first time in what seems like an awfully long time, there was no need to hustle as I did my farm chores, teeth gritted, shoulders hunched up against an evil, cold wind nipping at whatever you left exposed. An older farming friend told me that at the height (depth?) of the cold, he was feeding 30 bales of hay a day to his cows, the snow was despairingly deep, and he really was not sure he was going to make it through. I'm pretty sure he was referring to his personal welfare, not that of the cows.



But with the weather moderating and the March sun growing stronger every day, a person begins to believe again in the possibility of spring. And so I found excuses to hang around outside, even after my chores were done. I set out a lawn chair in the sun, hunkered down behind a snowbank to escape the breeze, and played games with the chickadees. I put sunflower seeds in the suet feeders, the bare spot by my feet, and on the barbeque grill and we played hide-and-seek with the camera. The chickadees are bold, but by the time I get

the camera to focus, it's surprisingly difficult to get a good shot. Still, it's a fun game to enjoy on a nice day.

It sounded so good to hear the birds. They were no longer frantic on the feeders, and seemed to have all the time in the world. The crows are back, harassing the owls in the neighborhood. Look for eagles in the road ditches, as they stock up on road-killed venison. The red-breasted nuthatches look like little wind-up toys as they work their way down the pine trees. A raven cruises his way through, looking for whatever might make a meal. And a male pine grosbeak perched on the top of the tallest spruce tree, warbling out a little bit of a song.

The grosbeaks interest me. A large finch that lives in subarctic and boreal forests, they come south into the northern Great Lakes states in the winter. During exceptional winter irruptions, known as invasion years, pine grosbeaks become conspicuous farther south. The winter availability of foods like cones and berries is thought to influence their distribution during

invasion years. This bird eats a variety of foods, and its short, conical beak allows it to nip the buds and growing tips of conifer branches, as well as crush seeds.

You will often see pine grosbeaks along the road sides in the winter, as they are attracted by the sand and salt. Vehicle collisions with this unwary bird are common.

On the Chippewa National Forest, we see pine grosbeaks during migration, and in the winter in varying numbers. The winter flocks are often comprised of 5 to 10 close-knit birds, which are believed to be families or groups of families. They started showing up at my feeder mid-winter this year. A flock of about 15 birds frequented the area. You could hear them coming in the morning, because the habit of the males included loud calling from tall treetops.

A very vocal species, you can hear the birds making flight calls and contact notes, both of which function to keep the flock together as it moves and feeds. I read that the flight calls of the young grosbeaks are similar to that of their parents, and analysis of winter flight calls can provide clues as to what area the flock has originated from.

The males are much more brightly colored than are the females, with quite a bit of red in their plumage. At first I thought there were only 1 or 2 males travelling with this flock, but when I did a bit of reading, learned that males do not get their adult coloring until the fall of their second year. Enjoy them while they are here; by late March or early April these birds are likely to head back North.

As the weekend came to a close, the one who knows me so well built a campfire in the yard, and fired up the barbecue grill. I can't remember the last time it was so nice out that you could contemplate the colors of the fire, and not feel a bone-jarring cold. What a treat to sit and watch the flames dance, the flares of the yellow, the purple hues, until the glow of the orange coals is all that is left.

