



Audubon at Home in Northern Virginia

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Rose-breasted Grosbeak (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*)

The stunningly beautiful male Rose-breasted Grosbeak, black and white with a triangle of rose red on its breast, white or straw colored heavy beak, and rosy wing linings that show in flight, is not easily mistaken for any other songbird in the Mid-Atlantic. The female, however, except for her large size, could be seen as a sparrow, being buffy brown above with sparrow-like streaking on white underparts. Two broad white wingbars and a conspicuous white line over brown eyes are distinguishing field marks for her. They are migratory, spending winters in Mexico and northern South America, and returning to the northeastern U.S. and southern Canada in spring to breed. Males have a long, liquid, robin-like song, and often sing in the nest and at night. Females also sing, but a softer, shorter song. This beautiful species is declining from habitat loss, window strikes, and cat predation.

What Rose-breasted Grosbeaks Need

Food: The large heavy beak indicates they are seed eaters. They forage in trees, eating seeds of elms and catalpa, blossoms of hickory and beeches, and buds of white ash. Beetles, grasshoppers, cankerworms, tent caterpillars, tussock moths, gypsy and brown-tailed moths, and some fruit and grains diversify their diet.

Breeding: The nest is usually in thickets or small trees, 5-15 ft. above ground, sometimes 25-50 ft. up in birches, often near water. The male may help the female build, using small sticks, fine twigs, and coarse straw, all loosely woven and lined with grasses and rootlets, sometimes horsehairs. Both sexes incubate the eggs.

Shelter: Birds seek shelter from predators and bad weather in leafy canopy, conifers and shrubs.

Other: Grosbeaks will use birdbaths and small ponds when they first arrive on migration. Cats are major predators of songbirds and kill millions each year. Window collisions are also a serious problem.

Resources:

Plants—available at Nature By Design, Hyla Brook Farm, DeBaggio Herbs, Merrifield Garden Center and Musser Forests, Inc

Bird feeders, food, anti-window collision devices—available from local wild bird stores

Pond liners—available at local home improvement stores

Model Rose-breasted Grosbeak Habitats:

Prince William Forest Park—www.nps.gov/prwi/

Riverbend Park—www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/riverbend/

Huntley Meadows Park—www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/huntley/

How You Can Help

- Plant trees that produce seeds early in the summer like elm, willow and maple.
- Their favorite fruit trees include black cherry, hackberry, choke cherry and mulberry.
- Avoid pesticides that kill insects Grosbeaks feed on.
- Provide feeders stocked with sunflower and safflower seeds.
- Rose-breasted Grosbeaks nest primarily in the higher elevations of the Mid-Atlantic, and not in coastal or piedmont areas
- Plant trees and shrubs that will provide resting and hiding places when the birds pass through on migration. Try southern bayberry, summersweet, rosebay rhododendron, Virginia sweetspire and eastern red cedar.
- Provide birdbaths or a small pond with fresh, clean water.
- Keep cats indoors.
- Adopt strategies to avoid window collisions.

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