

New Hampshire Bird Records





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Davis Finch

This issue of *New Hampshire Bird Records* with its color cover is sponsored by friends of Davis Finch in honor of his receipt of the 2016 Goodhue-Elkins Award (see page 2). Known to many as the friendly host of a meat pile that once attracted many birds, Davis is a humble world expert on birds, who over the years has kindly helped many local birders.



*Davis surrounded by gulls coming to the meat pile.
Photo by Scott Heron.*

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Cover Photos: Redwing in flight by Christopher McPherson on the day he discovered it, 3/13/16, in Hollis, NH. Perched Redwing by Jason Lambert, and the crowd viewing the bird, photographed by Frank Mantlik, 3/14/16.

New Hampshire Bird Records is published quarterly by New Hampshire Audubon's Conservation Department. Thank you to the many observers who submit their sightings to NH eBird (www.ebird.org/nh), the source of data for this publication. Records are selected for publication and not all species reported will appear in the issue. The published sightings typically represent the highlights of the season. All records are subject to review by the NH Rare Birds Committee and publication of reports here does not imply future acceptance by the Committee. Please contact the Managing Editor if you would like to report your sightings but are unable to use NH eBird.

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Spotlight on Blue Grosbeak (*Passerina caerulea*)

by David B. Donsker



Blue Grosbeak by Roger Frieden, 5/8/16, Manchester, NH.

Blue Grosbeak (*Passerina caerulea*) is a member of a genus of generally colorful buntings of North and Middle America that includes among its members such gems as Painted Bunting and Varied Bunting and other “blue buntings” including the very closely related Lazuli Bunting of the American West and our familiar Indigo Bunting. The Blue Grosbeak is the “incredible hulk” of the clan. It is not only larger than the other members of the genus, but it also sports a massive conical bill and slightly peaked crown which gives it a rather bull-headed appearance. Its plumage at all seasons and ages in both sexes is very similar to Indigo Bunting except that both sexes have two chestnut-cinnamon wing bars which, in addition to its huge bill, sets it apart from its more common cousin.

In its breeding habitat, Blue Grosbeak is a relatively widespread but uncommon, low density species. It is a creature predominantly of weedy fields and forest edge bordering on bushy open areas and streams. In the southwest, it also favors drier bushy desert and savanna and, in the southeast, open pine forest. During breeding season, males can often be spotted on transmission wires or singing from the tops of trees or bushes. In migration, it favors similar habitats, but will also inhabit the brushy edges of cultivated fields, overgrown vegetable gardens and bushy pastures. In these habitats, it can be skulking and elusive.

The breeding range of Blue Grosbeak extends from the Mid-Atlantic States throughout the American south and southwest, Mexico and Central America to Costa Rica. It winters as far south as Panama.

As with many other southeastern species such as Red-bellied Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse and Northern Cardinal, the original range of this species was much more southern than its current distribution. Since the mid-twentieth century, its breeding range has expanded

northward to include southeastern New York and northern New Jersey, but unlike the aforementioned species, Blue Grosbeak has not established itself as a breeding bird in New England. Yet, it is a regular, but rare, spring and fall visitor to northern New England with records from Maine and Massachusetts and occasionally into southeastern Canada, predominantly as migratory overflights in the spring and vagrants in the fall. Very occasionally they can be seen at feeders until early winter, but few survive the winter in northern New England.

Occurrence in New Hampshire

Blue Grosbeak is a rare to very uncommon, but increasingly regular, visitor to our state, primarily in the spring and fall. As Figure 1 indicates, it is more commonly seen in the spring and is less often detected in the fall. Most frequently, it is found as a single individual that is observed for only a day. In the fall, it frequently joins mixed flocks of other seed-eating birds, where it can often be seen for two to several consecutive days. Summer records are rare, but when individuals are discovered, they can persist for many days to weeks, perhaps in an attempt to set up a breeding territory. A good example of this was a vocal male discovered in the weedy field at the NH Audubon's McLane Center in Concord on June 8, 2007 until June 17. Another individual was seen off and on in Hollis throughout the month of July in 1992. An additional summer visitor persisted for nearly two weeks in Nashua from May 30 to June 12, 2012.

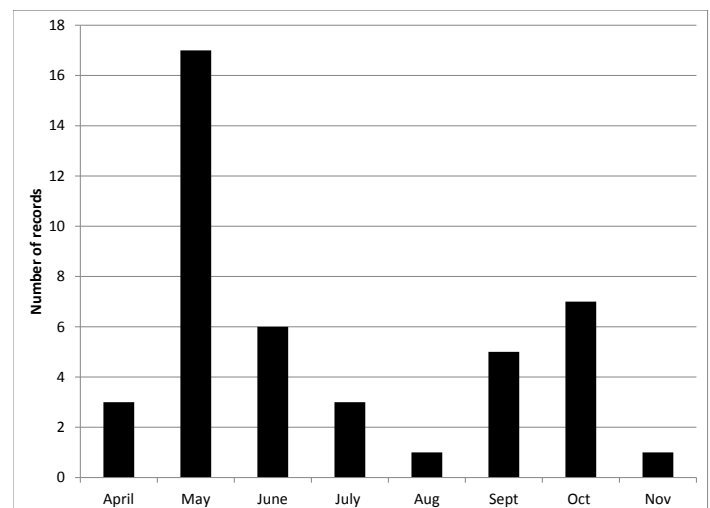


Figure 1. Blue Grosbeak sightings in New Hampshire by month, March 1, 1986 through May 31, 2016. Data from eBird and New Hampshire Bird Records as cited in Data Sources.

According to Keith and Fox (2013), Blue Grosbeak was first reported in New Hampshire in Derry in late May, 1894. The few records of this species in the first half of the twentieth century were primarily summer sightings in Pittsfield, Concord, Jackson and, notably for three consecutive summers in the 1920s, in Franklin.

Sightings increased substantially in the latter half of the twentieth century. From 1960 to the spring of 2016, there have been at least 58 reports of this species as extracted from Keith and Fox (2013), *New Hampshire Bird Records* and NH eBird. As mentioned previously, the majority of these (33) are spring sightings. Seventeen are fall reports and the remaining 11 are summer records.

The appearance of this species in New Hampshire over the years has not been predictable or steady. Rather, there seems to be some years or periods in which this species has been more frequently seen. Veit and Petersen (1991) report that 1973 was a major flight year in Massachusetts with a total of 31 individuals reported in the spring of that year. Although New Hampshire didn't appear to have a major flight year that year, there were a total of 16 sightings in the five years between 1992 and 1997 and 13 in the last five years from 2011-2016. This contrasts significantly with only eight sightings reported in the entire decade from 1998-2009 (See Figure 2).

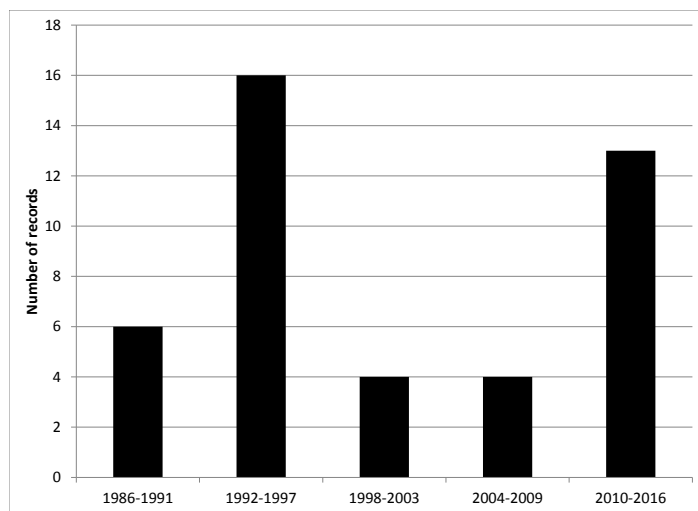


Figure 2. Blue Grosbeak sightings in New Hampshire by year, March 1, 1986 through May 31, 2016. Data from eBird and New Hampshire Bird Records as cited in Data Sources.

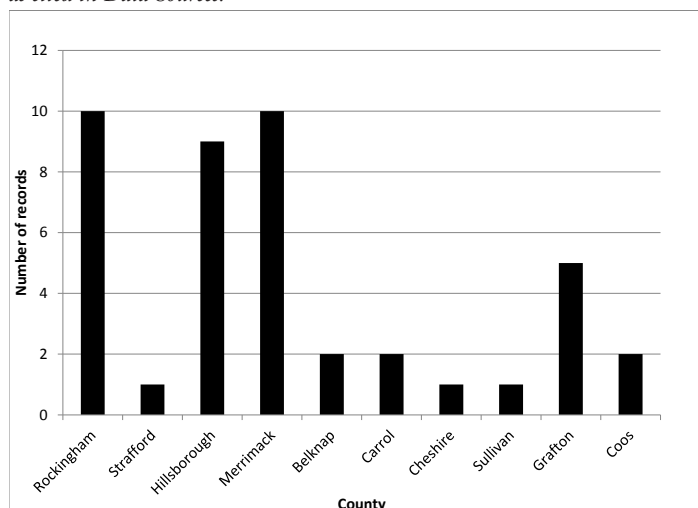


Figure 3. Blue Grosbeak sightings in New Hampshire by County, March 1, 1986 through May 31, 2016. Data from eBird and New Hampshire Bird Records as cited in Data Sources.

Perhaps not unexpectedly for a species with southern affinities, sightings in recent years have largely been from the southern half of the state. The vast majority of reports have been from Rockingham, Hillsborough and Merrimack Counties (Figure 3), although every county in the state has had at least one record since 1986. These are also more heavily birded and populous counties, so this pattern of observations might also be influenced by that factor.

Because the appearance of Blue Grosbeak in New Hampshire is sporadic and unpredictable, actually encountering one is a rare event. In the fall, especially, it is a good idea to check weedy fields and carefully examine mixed flocks of seedeaters. In recent years, the Birch Street Community Garden in Concord has been a fairly active site for this species in the fall. There have been sightings at this location in late September and early October in four consecutive years from 2011 through 2014 and the descriptions indicate it was not the same bird each year. No other site in the state has been as reliable for this desirable species. Finally, don't discount the resemblance of this species to Indigo Bunting and vice versa. Although its huge bill and cinnamon wing bars are distinctive, they can be deceiving when there is no other bird for comparison, and in other aspects these two closely related species resemble each other quite strongly. It's always wise to take a second look, and a photo for documentation.

Thanks to Steve Mirick for reviewing this article and for providing helpful comments.

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Abbreviations Used

BBC	Brookline Bird Club
BBS	Breeding Bird Survey
CA	Conservation Area
CC	Country Club
CFT	NH Audubon Chapter Field Trip
FT	Field Trip
IBA	Important Bird Area
L.	Lake
LPC	Loon Preservation Committee
NA	Natural Area
NHA	New Hampshire Audubon
NHBR	New Hampshire Bird Records
NHRBC	NH Rare Birds Committee
NWR	National Wildlife Refuge
PMRO	Pack Monadnock Raptor Observatory
PO	Post Office
R.	River
Rd.	Road
RO	Raptor Observatory
Rt.	Route
SF	State Forest
SP	State Park
SPNHF	Society for the Protection of NH Forests, Concord
T&M	Thompson & Meserves (Purchase)
TNC	The Nature Conservancy
WMA	Wildlife Management Area
WMNF	White Mountain National Forest
WS	NHA Wildlife Sanctuary
~	approximately
WTP	Wastewater Treatment Plant

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