Get Wild: Rosy finches are a winter delight
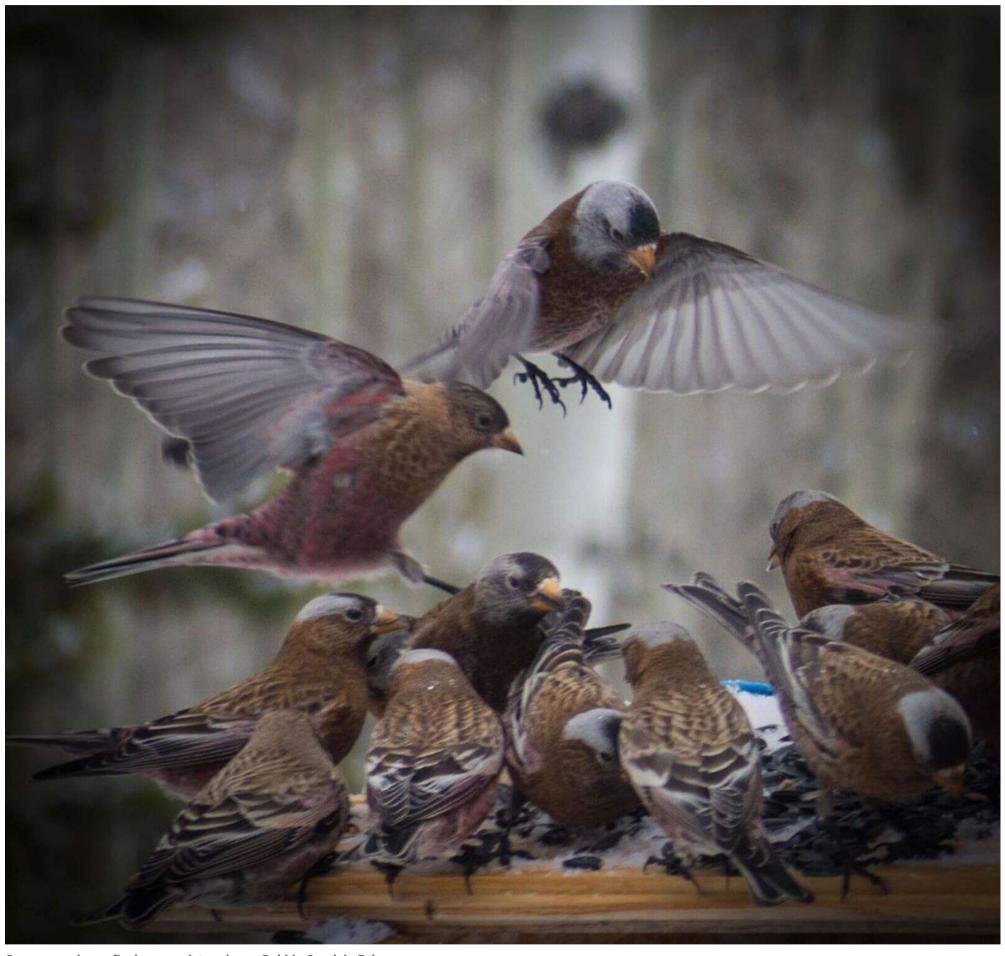
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Joan Betz
Get Wild

Gray-capped rosy finches are pictured near Pebble Creek in February.
Bill Betz/Courtesy photo

At our cabin bordering the national forest near Pebble Creek, we were delighted when a large flock of rosy finches suddenly descended from the sky. Quickly grabbing sunflower seeds from the feeders, the finches, as if by unspoken agreement, quickly flew away. Perching in nearby aspen trees, they swooped down again and grabbed a seed or two before flying up.

We have several winter feeder platforms for birds, as we are located amid aspen, pine, spruce and fir trees. Routine visitors are two kinds of woodpeckers (downy and hairy) and three kinds of nuthatches (white-breasted, red-breasted and pygmy) as well as Steller's jays, gray jays and pine grosbeaks. But the rosy finches are less predictable. After their recent arrival, we began putting out more sunflower seeds. Again, a horde of rosy finches swooped in and have been returning daily for the past three weeks.

Rosy finches are among the thousands of species considered passerine (perching birds) and are grouped with other finches in the family Fringillidae. There are three species of rosy finches found in Colorado: the gray-crowned (Leucosticte tephrocotis), the brown-capped (L. australis) and the black (L. atrata). There are also subpopulations that can hybridize when their ranges overlap.

All are slender birds, slightly smaller than a house sparrow, about 6.25-inches long with wingspan of 13 inches and weighing about 1 ounce. They have plain, brownish bodies with hints of pink on the belly and edges of wings, distinguished by a gray crown, or a mostly brown head or a distinctly darker body depending on which species.

Rosy finches characteristically hop on the ground, searching for seeds and insects. They also typically fly up in swirls from feeding areas. Their song is a rather harsh, low "cheep, cheep."

Rosy finches are found on open ground at higher elevations, usually tundra. The common gray-crowned rosy finch is native to Western Canada, Alaska, the northwest U.S. and the Rockies. The black and the brown-capped rosy finch have more limited ranges, primarily the northwest U.S. and Colorado to northern New Mexico, respectively.

All breed in summer in barren mountain areas, including edges of snowfields and rocky scree, breeding at perhaps the highest altitudes of any U.S. bird. Females build nests in mid-June in sheltered locations on rocky ground or holes in a cliff. Cup nests of grass, roots and lichen are lined with hair, fur and grass. Females incubate three to five eggs for two weeks. Both parents feed the chicks for three weeks before the chicks leave the nest.

Their favorite summer food is insects, found in meadows and scree slopes by the snowfields. Winter food is mostly seeds from diverse plants. When not breeding, and especially in winter, mixed flocks of about 100 individuals will descend to lower elevations, choosing open areas in forests and towns. Rosy finches later return to Alpine areas in spring, even when snow remains deep.

Because rosy finches forage on snow slopes and Alpine meadows, this habitat reliance renders them vulnerable to the effects of climate change, both from melting ice fields and encroachment by shrubby plants. According to Partners in Flight, the brown-capped and black rosy finch populations are two of 19 species on the Red Watch list, for species of highest concern.

Joan Betz

"Get Wild" publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Joan Betz is a retired biology professor from Regis University, and a board member of Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties.

Rosy Finches

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