

Rosy Finch

Leucosticte tephrocotis

Finches of the family *Fringillidae* are multicolored seedeaters with buoyant and undulating flight. The word finch, derived from the Anglo-Saxon word "finc," is possibly an imitation of their song. Many species nest in the far north at high elevations above treeline. Although the Rosy Finch displays many regional variations in its colorful plumage, it is the only finch species with a solid, dark breast. Throughout most of Alaska, the Gray-crowned Rosy Finch is the most common form.

Unwary and easily approached, the Gray-crowned Rosy Finch inhabits the barren rock, alpine grasslands and tundra of high mountains. At 15cm, these birds are medium-sized, with slender bodies, long tails and wings and short, black legs. As their name implies, breeding adults of the Gray-crowned Rosy Finch adorn a distinctive light-gray hind-crown and bright rosy rump, wings and belly. Their body is rich brown contrasted by a blackish forehead. However, juvenile birds are brown overall. Although the bill is black in spring, it turns yellow by winter. In flight, the underwings are a lovely, translucent silver.

Heard infrequently, the bubbling song of the Gray-crowned Rosy Finch is a slow series of husky, whistled notes, "jeew, jeew, jeew.." A high, chirping "chew" call is often given during courtship flight.

As semi-colonial nesters, male Gray-crowned Rosy Finches often outnumber females by a ratio of six to one! Loosely cup-shaped, nests are built above 7000' on the ground or in cliffs or crevices. Nests may be reused in the same season or in subsequent years. After the female selects the site, she assembles the bulky nest of mosses, grasses, rootlets, forbs, and lichen. Lined with fine grasses, hair and feathers (especially from ptarmigan), the nest houses the 3-6, 23mm, white and unmarked eggs of the clutch. The female alone incubates the clutch for 12-14 days, although the male feeds her while she is on the nest. In another 18-22 days, the young birds fledge and are cared for by both parents. Amazingly, the parents develop buccal pouches, openings from the floor of the mouth, in order to carry food to the nestlings.

Gray-crowned Rosy Finches forage in small flocks. As they hop along the ground, adults glean seeds of grasses and forbs as well as insects from snow patches. Young birds are fed exclusively insects.

The Gray-crowned Rosy Finch occurs in loose winter flocks in the lowlands of North America. In summer, they nest in the far north at high elevations (above 7000') throughout most of mainland Alaska, Yukon, and British Columbia south into Montana, Idaho and Oregon.