

Nuthatches among birds that remain in colder climate

NATURE NOTES



TIM NOWICKI

Neighborhood birds sure are taking advantage of our feeding station. Black-capped chickadees are bouncing back and forth, from branch to feeder and back again. It has always been amazing to me how such a tiny ball of feathers can survive in such cold temperatures.

I was very pleased to see our Carolina wren the other day, too. In the past, winters with deep snow and prolonged cold temperatures have caused Carolina wrens to die. That is because they are more adapted to a warmer climate like that found in the southern states. Maybe a constant, easily accessible food supply, like my bird feeder, can provide enough energy to allow them to survive.

But one of my favorite feeder birds is the white-breasted nuthatch. This is the small bird that constantly goes headfirst down the tree trunk. They have a black or a gray cap to their head. Males have the black cap, females the gray cap. Their back is a blue-gray color and as their name indicates, they have a white breast. Below the bend of the wing there may be a smudge of rusty-orange.

A close cousin that visits southeastern Michigan from northern Michigan and Canada is the red-breasted nuthatch. It has a dark line that passes through the eye from the base of

the bill to the back of the head. The white-breasted nuthatch has a large white cheek area with no black line.

White-breasted nuthatches are sedentary; they stay around all year, unlike the red-breasted that moves south during winter every two to three years. In fact, there are white-breasted nuthatches nesting in our yard, or very close. During the summer they visit our feeders regularly. They even bring their young to our feeders and show

them what to eat and where they can eat.

Nuthatches nest in a small tree cavity made from a branch that broke off which created a hole where it was once attached. They may even use an abandoned woodpecker hole. I have watched them conduct minimal excavation on a cavity. Like the chickadee that nests in a cavity, they cannot excavate the new hole because their bill is not strong enough. They can only improve on an existing hole.

A nuthatch uses its bill to probe under the rough texture of tree bark to search for insect eggs, spider eggs, dormant insects or spiders, and any other small invertebrates. When they come to my feeder, they take a sunflower seed and wedge it into the bark where upon they proceed to extract the kernel from the husk. If they do not eat the seed they will secure it in a crevice and return later to eat it, if another bird does not find it first.

Their curious habit of searching tree trunks by moving down the tree is thought to improve their chances of finding food undiscovered by other kinds of birds. Woodpeckers and creepers typically move up a tree trunk. Nuthatches searching in the opposite direction may find food the other birds did not see.

To help them hang downward, nuthatches have an extra long nail on their backwards pointing toe. This nail provides extra purchase when there is only one

anchor point that holds most of the weight.

Nuthatches are neat little birds. Their slightly upturned bill and stocky body reminds me of a feathered dart flying through the air toward my bird feeder. I hope you are enjoying those attracted to your feeders.

Livonia resident Tim Nowicki is a naturalist with Independence Oaks Park north of Clarkston in Oakland County. He can be reached at (248) 625-6473.

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