



Insects taste just as good on the underside of a limb!
Foraging upside down is normal for
tree-creeping nuthatches.



Pine-tree loving Red-breasted Nuthatches may be
found in our area during migration and winter

Brunswick Wildlife Nuthatches Make Me Smile

Years ago I realized that every time a Brown-headed Nuthatch flew into a tree or feeder I smiled as I watched it, an automatic response based on years of watching their antics

Nuthatches are fairly tolerant of human presence. The audacity of their direct, daring approach to my feeder, with the behemoth that just filled it still close by and the other birds waiting cautiously in the bushes, is impressive.

As usual I had a family of nuthatches nesting nearby this summer, dining at my feeders and entertaining me. The nest was in a dead snag in my neighbor's yard. Sitting on the lawn behind the feeder and in line with the snag, I could watch the adults dive out of their cavity tree and follow their inbound flight path. Cool!

My smile response has transferred to all nuthatches. One has to admire their beauty, in-your-face attitude, flying ability, and gravity-defying foraging.

White-breasted and Red-breasted Nuthatches are the other nuthatches found in the Lower Cape Fear. The former is noticeably the largest, with a white face and breast. The White-breasted is a year-round resident but less common than the Brown-headed.

Recently, I was helping another photographer find a migrating Yellow-billed Cuckoo that had just flown into an oak near the NC Aquarium. I heard a loud, incoming bird just to my right and slightly behind me. I immediately recognized the monotone call, a repeated nasal “wank wank wank”, as a Red-breasted Nuthatch flew in.

It seemed very hungry from its travels so I was able to approach and take incredibly close photos, watching it work two small pine saplings at a distance as near as five feet.

Red-breasted Nuthatches breed across Canada and into Alaska; in the northern United States and western mountains; and down the Appalachians to North Carolina in coniferous habitats that include spruce, fir, and pine trees. They will forage in oaks and other hardwoods where conifers are scarce.

They are easily recognizable by their white supercilium and bold, black transocular eye stripe, with blue-gray on top and warm rufous underneath. The black eye stripe gives them a bit of a menacing look. Attitude I tell you!

The Red-breasted is a very active forager. It creeps around branches and up and down tree trunks searching for insects, spiders, and conifer seeds. Again they will visit feeders, preferring black oil sunflower seeds. Also look for them in the woods in mixed-species feeding flocks with other small birds during the winter.

Red-breasted Nuthatches use small pieces of bark to pry off loose bark to reveal insects. For now it is the only bird in North America documented to use “tools” except for a few members of the Corvid family including American Crows and Blue Jays.

Red-breasted Nuthatches are migratory for much of their range. Like other northern boreal species such as siskins, finches, and crossbills, they are known for periodic irruptions. In an irruption year, larger numbers of a species move further south than in normal years. Therefore, they may be abundant in a given location some years and totally absent in others.

Irruptions do not happen every year so it adds excitement to winter birding when they do. Irruptions are probably related to poor cone and seed crops on traditional wintering grounds, resulting in birds irrupting into areas with a more plentiful food supply like our forests and feeders.

According to knowledgeable sources, early arrivals of nuthatches and siskins south of their normal wintering grounds began in August. This may indicate poor cone crops on spruces, balsam fir, and white pines in forests across Ontario, maritime Canada, New York, and other northeastern States. It is too early to tell; however, 2010-11 may be an irruption winter.

Hopefully they will show up in your yard this winter. Keep an eye out and a smile on!

John Ennis



Have a stand of tall pines nearby? You probably have Brown-headed Nuthatches as year-round neighbors.