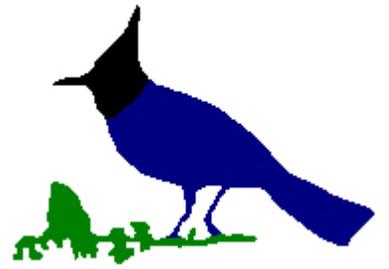


Nature Notes

The Red-breasted Nuthatch ***(Sitta canadensis)***



This active little acrobat is a frequent winter visitor to bird feeders where it is as happy upside down as right side up since it is our only bird species which commonly descends trees headfirst. The red-breasted species can be distinguished from the white-breasted nuthatch both by its colour and by the presence of an obvious white eyebrow stripe. The male can be identified by his jet black cap, which is more solidly coloured than that of the female. Their strong hind toes and short strong tail are both adaptations enabling the nuthatch to descend trees upside down, giving it a clear view of food hidden in crevices in the tree bark in places other birds don't see.

The name "nuthatch" comes from their habit of wedging seeds into tree bark and then hammering with their bills in order to open them. They make many trips to feeders and cache the larger seeds in tree bark in case of food shortages later. In the wild nuthatches eat conifer seeds during the winter while a variety of insect and spider forms make up a large part of their summer diet.

The red-breasted nuthatch can both winter and breed in western North America. Some members of the species will migrate north as far as the northern tree line to breed and then return south to winter.

You can identify these little forest birds even if you don't see them by their nasal territorial song, though the word song seems a bit complimentary for the ank-ank-ank noise they make. They sound like they have a perpetual sinus problem! They also use a variety of high "tin whistle" notes to communicate with the family.

In the spring both genders will work at excavating a nest cavity in a tree or rotting stump although they will use existing cavities and have been known to nest in boxes. They will use their bills to smear spruce and pine pitch around the nest entrance, likely to discourage climbing predators. The nest cavity is lined with soft grasses and hair then the female then lays four to seven eggs which are incubated for 12 days. Both parents then catch a variety of insects to feed the hatchlings, culminating in as many as 350 feeding visits per day at 18 days after hatching. The young fledge in three weeks or less and then remain in a family group with the parents for several weeks.



Red-breasted Nuthatch

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