

First Illinois Record of the Brown-headed Nuthatch

by Brad Semel

Wednesday, 11 July 2001. 3:45pm. I am on my knees in a narrow wetland swale in the south unit of Illinois Beach State Park, Lake County, Illinois. The location is south of the Dead River in a rare wetland community where we are recording the distribution and abundance of state-listed endangered and threatened plants and evaluating the imminent threat to this globally significant plant community by invasive, exotic plants and altered hydrology.

A brief series of unfamiliar, "chee-chee-chee" calls catch my attention. Later, it would be better described as resembling a "squeaky toy." When I look up, I see a small bird of just over 4 inches gleaning the terminal branch of a Scotch pine (*Pinus sylvestris*). The bird is about 50 feet away and in the shadows of the pine bough. The foraging behavior suggests a nuthatch, but the vocalizations and the uniform gray plumage of the back do not match that of the commonly occurring White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*). When I stand to approach the bird and obtain a better angle, the bird moves to the bole of the tree and begins working vertically upward. The position of the bird now affords me a view of the head and its distinctive chocolate brown plumage.

The foraging behavior and head coloration encompass the possibility of a Brown Creeper (*Certhia americana*), but the plumage on the wings and back is not correct. The white underparts eliminate the Red-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta canadensis*). Could this be an immature displaying an unfamiliar plumage? I walk swiftly to my backpack and binoculars. Quite unexpectedly, the bird flies directly at me, landing at the terminal end of a pine bough about 35 feet from where I am standing and about 12 feet from the ground. The late afternoon sun is coming from about 2° to the west of the bird, providing vivid colors of the plumage. The most distinctive characteristics noted through binoculars are its dark eye plumage (resembling a black dot), the chocolate-brown cap, and an hour-glass white marking on the nape of the neck. It is clearly a surprising find; a Brown-headed Nuthatch (*Sitta pusilla*).

I have no reference books with me (other than "Plants of the Chicago Region"), so I quickly sketch the bird, noting such characteristics as the turquoise lower mandible, black eye plumage (no stripe or eye ring), chocolate cap, hour-glass white marking on the nape, rufous brown primaries, white breast with a slight buff or off-white under the throat, equal length of the primary and tail, and its distinctive twittering "chee, chee, chee" call that sounded nothing like that of the other nuthatches inhabiting the region. I watch the bird for another 20 minutes.

An hour later, at the car, field guides are consulted, including Stokes & Stokes (1996) and Robbins et al (1966). The photograph depicted in Stokes & Stokes (1996) was convincing. This was indeed a Brown-headed Nuthatch. The next morning, other reference books were consulted, including Kaufman (2000) and Sibley (2000). It wasn't until Bohlen (1989) was consulted, however, that I realized the true significance of this find. It was a new state record.

Now the dilemma. As described earlier, the area in which the bird was found is one of the most ecologically sensitive places in the park. Indeed, due to the sensitive nature of the area, it is closed to public access. Therefore, I contacted Bill Wengelewski, Site Naturalist for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, to see if he could help verify the species and to discuss options for making public this discovery in light of the phenology of the plant communities on site. We made a perusal of the area the afternoon of 12 July, but were not able to relocate the bird. The next morning, David B. Johnson and Danny Diaz accompanied me to the site to assist with verifi-

cation. The bird gave its distinctive call note at 6:30a.m., an hour after our search had commenced. The bird was perched in a pine tree about 20 feet above the ground. It did little feeding, but was rather intent on preening.

The lighting of the early morning presented a considerably different appearance of the bird than the previous observations I had made: the brown cap and gray plumage seemed to be distinctively paler. All three of us photographed and observed the bird at close range until we departed at 8:05 a.m. Danny Diaz mentioned the tree in which we left the bird that day was the one in which late last year the Red-cockaded Woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*), another recent addition to the state's avifauna, had often roosted (Sweet 2001).

It is interesting to note that the Brown-headed Nuthatch and Red-cockaded Woodpecker have nearly identical distribution maps, both preferring stands of mature pines in which to forage. The Red-cockaded Woodpecker was present at Illinois Beach State Park during the fall and winter of 2000. Because plants were in senescence and had set seed by this time, human disturbance was not a critical issue when considering whether to allow birders to view this rare species. The Brown-headed Nuthatch, however, was discovered during a time when most of the state-listed endangered and threatened plants were in bloom or had just set seed. A single footprint could have obliterated a years reproductive effort. After careful consideration, notice of the bird was posted on Illinois bird list serve, IBET, so that others interested in viewing the bird could have the opportunity. The number of permits for access was restricted and permit holders were required to accompany selected leaders who were advised to carefully guide participants, and to direct them from the most sensitive areas.

By the second week after initially confirming the Brown-headed Nuthatch, more than 60 people had the opportunity to observe the bird. As of press time, hundreds of birders had seen the species, and confirmed sightings were still being reported during the winter season. In fact, the nuthatch was documented on the Illinois 2001 Christmas Bird Count.

Withgott and Smith (1998) list no documentation of death by exposure to the elements; it will be interesting to learn whether this bird survives the Illinois winter. As of this writing, Illinois was experiencing an unusually mild winter. Perhaps a more serious threat than winter conditions is the possibility of avian predation. At least one observer of the Illinois bird noted a Sharp-shinned Hawk chasing the bird during fall migration (personal communication S. Bailey). Withgott and Smith (1998) noted there are no published accounts of predation on adult Brown-headed Nuthatches.

Status and distribution

Though neither threatened nor endangered, the Brown-headed



Brown-headed Nuthatch. Illinois Beach State Park, Lake County. First state record. Photo taken 13 July 2001 by David B. Johnson. The bird arrived 11 July 2001 and was still seen in December.