

Nuthatch is on the National WatchList of North American bird species. Birds on this list face population decline due to threats such as habitat loss on their breeding and wintering grounds. The WatchList focuses attention on at-risk bird species before they become endangered, and is compiled yearly by Partners in Flight, a coalition of state, federal, and private sector conservationists working to protect the birds of the western hemisphere.

The Brown-headed Nuthatch is found throughout the southeastern United States and is almost exclusively associated with stands of mature pines throughout its historic range (Withgott and Smith 1998). Interestingly, Illinois Beach State Park contains a rather large stand of Scotch (*Pinus sylvestris*) and Austrian pines (*Pinus nigra*), which, though not native, provide similar habitat structure.

The northern range of the Brown-headed Nuthatch runs through northeastern Texas, middle Tennessee, and eastward into far southern Pennsylvania. The bird historically nested as close as western Tennessee (Jackson 1988) and southeast Missouri (Robbins and Easterla 1992). Bohlen (1989) lists this species as "hypothetical" in Illinois, with the only reported observation mentioned in a letter (written by E.S. Currier) as two individuals seen in Hancock County in 1893. He further states that "since there is some dispersal of this small nuthatch, more records from Illinois are not out of the question, although it is hoped that they will be better documented."

According to the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's web site, "there is very little post-breeding dispersal in this species; once an individual establishes a breeding territory with a mate, it remains on that territory for many years, sometimes for its entire life. There is no information on juvenile dispersal, but fledglings remain with their parents throughout the fall and winter. Family flocks may join and forage with other families or with mixed-species flocks containing woodpeckers, kinglets, titmice, and warblers." A natural stochastic event such as a large forest fire, sustained drought, or total crop failure often forces bird species to make much larger movements than normal. See Withgott and Smith (1998). Mature pine forest habitat is seriously threatened throughout the range of this species, and is the primary reason the Brown-headed Nuthatch is imperiled.

Other extralimital records

Specimens of the Brown-headed Nuthatch have been collected in the eastern United States near Elmira, New York, 24 May 1888 (Bull 1974), near Boyertown, Pennsylvania, 6 September 1894 (Santner et al 1992), and Haddonfield, New Jersey in 1876 (Leck 1984). Four additional observations from Pennsylvania, most recently 12 August 1903, also have been reported (Santner et al 1992).

In the Midwest, one bird was photographed visiting a feeder in Milwaukee, Wisconsin from 1971 November through 1972 January (Robbins 1991). A brown-headed Nuthatch was also reported from 26 February to 19 April 2000 in Milwaukee County. (See The Passenger Pigeon 62:326.) Other Midwest records have included Indiana (Mumford and Keller 1984) and Ohio (personal communication Victor Fazio). Linda Gilbert identified a Brown-headed Nuthatch at her feeder in Geauga County, Ohio, 11 November 2001. She welcomed many Ohio birders who added the bird to their lists. The Brown-headed Nuthatch was still present at the Gilbert feeder as of 15 January 2002 (personal communication Victor Fazio). Victor Fazio watched the bird uplifting wood chips at the edge of a frozen pond, and gleaning the adjacent lawn sculpture, presumably looking for arthropods. "Linda Gilbert has identified some arthropods in the vicinity, possibly thrips, that are available to the nuthatch, he said.

According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's web site, Brown-headed Nuthatches "are acrobatic foragers, hopping and hitching along the branches of trees, often upside down. They forage mostly at the tips of treetops and near the tips of branches, looking for insects, spiders, and larvae hidden within the clusters of pine needles. In winter, their diet consists mainly of pine seeds. These

nuthatches do not cache large quantities of food, but they may store some seeds under the bark of pine trees... The Brown-headed Nuthatch is the only North American bird observed to regularly use a tool while foraging. Grasping a piece of bark in its bill, the Brown-headed Nuthatch pries up tree bark to expose prey hidden underneath. The nuthatch usually drops the tool after one use, but sometimes it will use the same tool repeatedly and carry it to other trees."

Final note on identification

The Pygmy Nuthatch (*Sitta pygmaea*) and the Brown-headed Nuthatch are nearly identically in appearance, and differ mainly in voice. Sibley (2000) shows the Pygmy to have a grayer cap, buffier flanks and less white on the primary edges than the Brown-headed Nuthatch. Their ranges do not overlap (Sibley 2000). Any bird of range should be studied carefully. A Pygmy Nuthatch was documented in Iowa 30 October 2000; the observer noted a grayish cap bordered by an indistinct darker line through the eye, and also some white on the tail corners (Kenne 2001). The Pygmy Nuthatch gave clear "peet" calls and none of its vocalizations sound like those of the Brown-headed Nuthatch. The Illinois Beach State Park Brown-headed Nuthatch was identified not only by sight, but also by its own distinct vocalizations, most often a rapid series of notes described as the "serial vocalization" by Withgott and Smith (1998).

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Sheryl De Vore for her editorial comments on this manuscript, and for including much additional information on the distribution and status of this species. I also would like to thank Danny Diaz and David Johnson for assistance in verifying my initial observations. Lastly, special thanks to Bill Wengelewski and the Illinois Beach State Park staff for their efforts to protect the fragile ecosystem of Illinois Beach State Park, while allowing others to enjoy the excitement of watching this most remarkable bird.

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