

White-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta carolinensis*



Folk Name: Upside-down Bird, White-bellied Nuthatch, Sapsucker

Status: Resident

Abundance: Fairly Common

Habitat: Mature forests

“They call me Nuthatch because I use my long beak to crack beech nuts and hazelnuts. I carry them to a notch in the tree and crack them there. But why do you turn your head down the tree instead of up? Oh, I don’t notice any difference in turning my head up or down.

I run down the tree as well as up. But my friend the Woodpecker can only run up, and when they only run up the tree they miss lots of spiders and caterpillars. You see I can follow them and get a good dinner.”

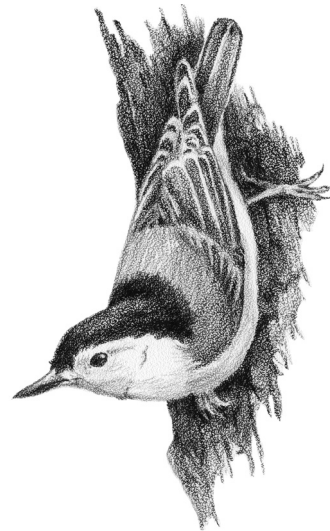
—A Tinker Bob Story carried in *The Charlotte News*, December 29, 1919

The White-breasted Nuthatch is the largest of our three nuthatch species, averaging almost 6 inches in length. It has a nasal *yank-yank-yank* or *waaank-waaank* call, and is a plump-looking bird with an obvious black crown. It is powder blue gray above and mostly white below, with a little rust on its belly and below. It has an all-white face with almost no eye line, which, along with its size, distinguishes it from both our other nuthatches. It is fairly common in open woods, parks, and wooded neighborhoods throughout the region. White-breasted Nuthatches are common visitors to backyard feeder stations in the winter and are known to cache food under tree bark for use later.

In the 1880s, the White-breasted Nuthatch was designated a common resident in the region with Loomis and McLaughlin recording it in both Chester and Iredell counties. Loomis collected multiple White-breasted Nuthatch specimens on December 21, 1889, along with four Red-breasted Nuthatches and later blithely noted:

The last [Red-headed Nuthatches] belonged to a little party that was quartered in a pine grove along with the company of Brown-headed Nuthatches, several White-breasted Nuthatches, and a group of Pine Warblers. This was the first time I ever had the pleasure of finding these three Nuthatches together in the same piece of woods, and the experience of shooting them in succession was highly novel.

About the same period, McLaughlin collected various sets of White-breasted Nuthatch eggs for sale to collectors. During a fauna survey conducted at Kings Mountain in Gaston County on June 29, 1916, J.L. Peters reported “one



heard calling just as I was breaking camp.”

Charlotte’s William McIlwaine shared these experiences searching for this nuthatch in January 1929:

This entry is to record some of my findings in a few short trips, mainly in Latta Park, or just across Dilworth Road from the park, on down to Kenilworth Avenue. I have been running out in the mornings for possibly an hour. These little excursions have been made in no small measure because I have been on the lookout for a white-breasted nuthatch. In my two long trips the last of December I began to notice that I was not recording this bird. And ever since I have been looking for him. My little daughter tells me she saw one in Myers Park a few days ago; but I have failed to find one.

He sighted his quarry 3 days later: “My search for the white-breasted nuthatch has finally been successful. I saw one in this same patch of woods with my red-bellied woodpecker. My little daughter reports a second one she has seen in the last few days.” McIlwaine went on to record many later that year.

In 1944, Elizabeth Clarkson shared this sighting: “one observed carrying nesting material into box in January but nest was not used.” In this region, White-breasted Nuthatches generally begin nest building in mid- to late March or early April. They choose existing holes and may use the same hole another year.

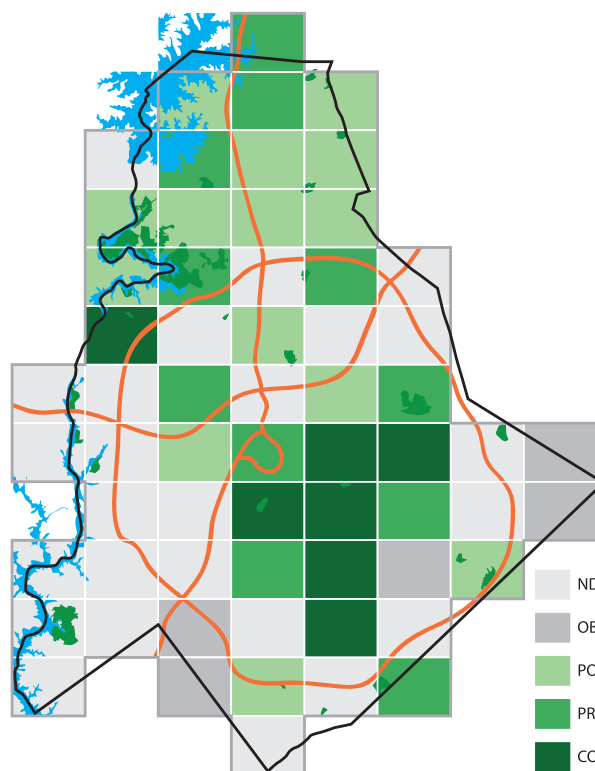
Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas volunteers discovered a pair of White-breasted Nuthatches nesting in

a cavity in the branch of a live white oak tree, about 35 feet off the ground. The branch jutted out perpendicular from the trunk and the hole was well protected. The tree was in the front yard of a house in a well-wooded Charlotte neighborhood, just beside a very busy residential street. This nest was used at least two years in a row. A second nest was found in a hole in the side of a cedar-sided home about 12 feet off the ground. Both nests were active in March.



*Juvenile White-breasted Nuthatch (above—Jeff Lemons).
Adult (below—Gary P. Carter).*

Development in Mecklenburg County appears to be affecting the local abundance of this bird. The availability of mature hardwood forest habitat for breeding has declined rapidly as the county has been slowly built-out. During the first 20 years on the Charlotte CBC, the White-breasted Nuthatch ranked 44th in the number of birds counted per party-hour. In the most recent 20-year period, it dropped to 56th place and it currently ranks 68th on the Southern Lake Norman CBC conducted in northern Mecklenburg County where development of hardwood forests around Lake Norman and along the Catawba River has been rampant. Our peak count one-day count in this region is 34 birds tallied on the Charlotte CBC in 1961.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Somewhat Local (PR/11, CO/7)