

## Brown Creeper *Certhia americana*



**Folk Name:** Nitered Bird

**Status:** Winter Resident

**Abundance:** Uncommon

**Habitat:** Wide variety of forests and mature woodlands

The Brown Creeper is a complete mystery to most non-birders. It is so inconspicuous that many people never see this bird while it is visiting their backyard in the winter with their local flock of chickadees and titmice. This 5-¼-inch brown-and-white songbird is cryptically colored and is often utterly silent. It tries to remain unseen by running to the backside of the tree whenever it sees movement or senses danger. The creeper's head, back, and wings are striped brown, while its rump and tail are a dull reddish brown. Its underparts are white. In flight between trees, it quickly flashes a buffy wing stripe with each wing stroke before it lands. A close inspection of its head reveals a white eyebrow, dark eye line, and a white throat. Its decurved bill is unusual in a songbird and the male's bill is slightly longer than the female's. It is used to pry up tree bark and to get at insects other birds might not be able to reach.

This songbird spends its winter days in our forests spiraling up trees from the bottom to the top, in search of insects, spiders, arthropod eggs, and occasionally a seed or two. When it finishes foraging at the top of one tree, it flies to the bottom of another and begins its climb all over again. Like our woodpeckers, the Brown Creeper never climbs down headfirst, it always climbs upward.

“The little brown creeper is one of the most systematic workers. He passes rapidly over rough barked trees, and the minutest insects rarely escape him.”

—*Lincoln County News*, March 5, 1907

In December 1913, Pearl Teague of Taylorsville included this in her letter to the editor printed in *The Mountain Scout* newspaper:

Boys and men should not kill the birds of North Carolina, for a great many of them kill the bugs, worms, and other insects that get on plants and trees. ...The services of the brown creeper are of great value in destroying insects of the woodland. It has a long curved bill for gathering the small insects or eggs from under the bark scales where the shorter billed birds can not reach.

In 1931, Statesville birder Maurice Stimson shared this characterization of this active bird:



The brown creeper: This is Nature's example of the virtuous drudge. He never stops to sing, or play, as other birds do. He is always seen flat against the bark of a tree, creeping upward. When he reaches the limbs, he drops down again to the foot of the next tree and starts his climb all over again. He can do a tree in 54 seconds, or 72 trees in an hour. He has the stiff, propping tail feathers of the woodpeckers. They account for his always moving upward and never down. He is only a winter visitor with us, arriving in October and remaining with us until April.

The Brown Creeper breeds in coniferous forests in the northern United States and Canada, as well as out west. Like the Red-breasted Nuthatch, a small population breeds in higher elevation forests in North Carolina's mountains. This is our only bird species that chooses a nest site under the loose bark of a dead tree. In spring, birders from the Central Carolinas often drive to the tops of the North Carolina mountains to visit the breeding grounds of the Brown Creeper, just to hear it sing. Its song is a high-pitched tinkling melody that echoes amongst the quiet of the evergreen forest.

Brown Creepers found in the Carolina Piedmont are believed to be birds that breed in the northern United States and Canada, which have migrated south for the winter. Their migratory routes and behaviors are not well understood, but most head south in September and October. Joe and Becky Norwood found two that had hit the WSOC television tower while migrating over Charlotte on the night of October 16, 1959. Our North Carolina breeding stock is believed to migrate altitudinally, not latitudinally, wintering in the warmer valleys of the mountain region.

Two of the oldest bird specimens collected in the Central Carolinas and still available for reference, are Brown Creepers. Both were collected on March 3, 1887, near Monroe in Union County, NC, and both are housed in the collections of the Field Museum in Chicago. In the late 1800s, Leverett Loomis reported that in Chester County during one winter season the Brown Creeper may be plentiful, while the next it may be “poorly represented” or “entirely wanting.” E.M. Hoffman and Elmer Brown reported this species in Rowan County on February 3, 1924.

William McIlwaine spied “one of those solitary little brown creepers” while taking a walk with his son in a Charlotte park during the first week of November 1926. He reported another “lone brown creeper” on March 19, 1927, and later noted “from time to time you will see the curious little brown creeper going up and down a tree trunk propping himself with his stiff tail feathers.” McIlwaine reported finding four Brown Creepers on New Year’s Day in 1929 and designated them as a “fairly common winter resident.” He last saw them in Charlotte in the spring on 4 April, 11 April, and 9 April in 1929, 1930, and 1931, respectively. Charlie Sellers reported the first arrival date of wintering Brown Creepers on 12 October in 1939 and their departure by 17 April in 1940. In Iredell County in 1941, Grace Anderson reported “For the first time in many years...I have seen the Brown Creeper, they used to be abundant...noted on October 13 and 22.” Charlotte Spring Bird Count observers noted a Brown Creeper lingering in Charlotte on May 5, 1984.

Today, the Brown Creeper is reported annually throughout the region, and it is often found foraging in conjunction with a mixed flock of other small songbirds.

Our earliest fall arrival date on record for the region is 9 September, and our latest spring departure date is 6 May. We have one acceptable report from the region during the months of June through August. Tammy and Tom Sanders reported finding one on July 14, 2008, along Brier Creek Greenway in Charlotte. They observed the bird using 8x42 binoculars at a distance of 20 feet and watched as it moved up the tree feeding less than 10 feet off the ground. They both expressed great surprise at finding this out of place bird in the middle of July and wondered why it was there. The bird did not appear to be sick or injured. Our peak one-day count of the Brown Creeper in the region is of 19 birds tallied on the Charlotte CBC in 2002.



*Brown Creeper in process of being banded. (MCPRD staff)*