

## Red-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta canadensis*



**Folk Name:** Red-bellied Nuthatch, Canada Nuthatch

**Status:** Migrant, Winter Visitor (irruptive)

**Abundance:** Rare to Uncommon

**Habitat:** Coniferous woods

The Red-breasted Nuthatch is a migrant and irregular winter visitor to the Carolina Piedmont. During breeding season, it is a denizen of far northern climes or higher mountain elevations. In North Carolina, this bird nests in the hemlock forests and spruce-fir forests of the Appalachian mountains, usually above 3,000 feet. Thomas Burleigh, an ornithologist stationed in Asheville with the U.S. Biological Survey in the 1920s and 1930s, studied this nuthatch, and in 1931, wrote:

At one time these birds were much commoner in North Carolina than they are today. Northern by temperament, it was only in the spruce woods on the higher ridges that they found conditions suitable to their more or less exacting requirements, and as this virgin timber was cut out over much of the western part of the state they disappeared with it. At the extreme southern limit of their range they are still fairly plentiful.

At only 4 ½ inches long, the Red-breasted Nuthatch is a small bird, yet it generates lots of excitement among



*Red-breasted Nuthatch at feeder. (Will Stuart)*



birders when it shows up here in the Central Carolinas. Many love to find these nuthatches at their feeders and to hear their diagnostic tin-horn-sounding *ank-ank-ank* call. Without hearing its call, this nuthatch can be identified by the conspicuous black line running from its bill through its eye and to the back, its white eyebrow, and its black cap above. Its upper parts are a powder blue gray, its throat white, and its underparts are rusty red.

Leverett Loomis shot his first specimen of a Red-breasted Nuthatch near the Chester County Courthouse on February 24, 1877, “in a wood of downy black-jack,” and he initially believed the species to be extremely rare. Ten years later, however, he had collected so many during several winters that he thought he must have overlooked them in his early years. Loomis had not yet learned of the irruptive nature of these migratory nuthatches. In some years, they are wholly absent in this part of the South. In other years, they can be a fairly common to common bird here. Scientists believe their movements are tied to changes in conifer cone production on their northern breeding grounds.

Our earliest fall arrival date appears to be 28 August in 2007. That year was noted as being “one of their best fall flights in several years.” Our peak one-day count is 26 birds tallied on the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count in 1980. Our latest spring departure date, however, is unclear. It is evident most have left the bulk of the Central Carolina region by the end of April. A few individuals linger into May, with one bird lingering in Mecklenburg County as late as 28 May in 2015. The South Carolina Bird Records Committee accepted a report of a Red-breasted Nuthatch present at a feeder in Whitestone, Spartanburg County, on June 3, 1994, providing a very rare summer record for that state.

However, in recent years, there have been several reports of Red-breasted Nuthatches in June at lower elevations along the western edge of the region. They have

been reported in the South Mountains and in Burke and Caldwell counties. In 2012, Dwayne Martin reported he had found this nuthatch in June for four years in a row at South Mountain State Park near 1,300 feet in elevation, and he speculated they were breeding there. His report is one of several recent June reports in North Carolina at lower elevations along dry pine-oak ridges and in Table

Mountain pine habitat. In 2005, Frank Renfrow published an article on the range expansion of the Red-breasted Nuthatch in southeastern states. In it, he specifically notes multiple new breeding records at low elevations in many areas of the southern Appalachians. Based on these reports, confirmation of breeding along the western boundary of this region may not be far off.