

## Brown-headed Nuthatch *Sitta pusilla*



**Folk Name:** Tomtit

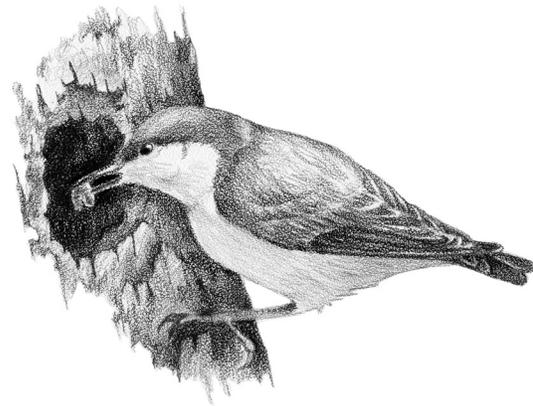
**Status:** Resident

**Abundance:** Uncommon to Fairly Common

**Habitat:** Coniferous or mixed woods

Audubon North Carolina calls the Brown-headed Nuthatch both “our quintessential southern bird” and “our darlin’ squeaky bird.” The Brown-headed is a favorite feeder bird of many residents in the Carolina Piedmont. Its call sounds like someone is squeezing a toy “rubber duck” and kids and adults alike find it fun to watch this bird run upside down around their bird feeders and the trees in their yard.

The Brown-headed Nuthatch is endemic to pine forests in the southeastern United States, and it is a common resident throughout the Central Carolina region. Sadly, like many cavity-nesting species, its population is in decline throughout much of its range. However, currently it appears to be holding steady in this part of the Carolina Piedmont. It is a fairly common resident of our pine and mixed pine forests and a regular visitor to most backyard feeder stations. Numbers decline somewhat in the western



J F M A M J J A S O N D

portion of this region, especially near the Foothills.

The Brown-headed Nuthatch has brown on the top of its head and a noticeable white patch at the base of its nape. Its face is white and its underparts are buff. Its back is ashy blue. It averages about the same length as the Red-breasted Nuthatch, 4 ½ inches, and is markedly smaller

### Spotlight on Local Research: Brown-headed Nuthatch vs. Eastern Bluebird

Dr. Mark Stanback at Davidson College has been conducting research on the competitive relationship between the Brown-headed Nuthatch and the Eastern Bluebird for more than a decade. He and his students have provided nest boxes for both species and have color-banded hundreds of individual birds and assessed their behavior. Stanback determined nuthatches are “capable of thriving in even heavily impacted suburban habitats” and that this may be a key to slowing their decline. However, the rapidly increasing bluebird regularly out-competes and may even exclude them from nest sites. Retrofitting nest boxes with bluebird-proof nest-hole constrictors, which allow access only to the nuthatches, was one option that appeared successful. Much of his work has been done at golf courses and in several parks in Iredell and Mecklenburg counties and in Pinehurst.

North Carolina harbors 14% of the global population of Brown-headed Nuthatches. Dr. Stanback has worked closely with Audubon



(Will Stuart)

North Carolina on a new initiative to assist this declining species. It is part of their Bird-Friendly Communities program. Over 10,000 nest boxes with restrictor plates denying access to bluebirds have been installed across the state. As of 2015, over 2,000 of these special nest boxes were distributed by Mecklenburg Audubon alone. Volunteers with the Central Carolinas Master Naturalist Program monitor many of these boxes each breeding season.

than the White-breasted. Because it is a species endemic to the Southeast, birders from other parts of the country often come to visit this area just to find this tiny nuthatch and add it to their life list.

During the heyday of oology, both R.B. McLaughlin of Statesville and C.S. Brimley of Raleigh, collected sets of Brown-headed Nuthatch eggs in the state and sold them to egg collectors around the country. In 1886, McLaughlin wrote this letter published in the journal *The Oologist*: “Have taken a nice clutch of the Brown-headed Nuthatch. In your hand book you price the eggs at 50¢. Is that the usual price? Of all dealers whose catalogues I have, I know of no one who catalogues the egg.”

In his later years, Brimley recalled that the eggs of the Brown-headed Nuthatch fetched a tidy price as the distribution of the bird was so limited. He personally collected 17 sets and provided this account of their natural nest site:

The nests in every case were in holes dug by the birds themselves in dead and partly decayed wood, sometimes in an old fencepost, more often in a dead stob or stump. ...The holes are dug from 18 inches to 12 feet above the ground. ...The hole would be just big enough for the bird to enter, and the inside of the stob would be dug out below the hole to a sufficient size to hold the nest, eggs, and incubating parent, the depth inside the hole being from 6 to 9

inches. This hollow would be lined with the wings of pine seeds, strips of the outer bark of birch or grapevine, the seed wings being always present.

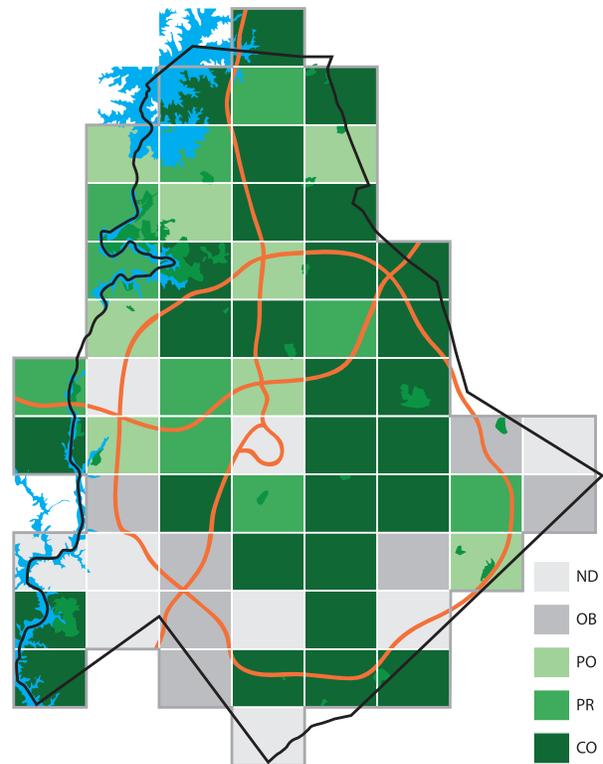
In March 1951 in Chapel Hill, C.D. Beers documented the first known use of a man-made nest box by the Brown-headed Nuthatch. In 1955, Tom Quay documented a second instance of nest box use by this species in Raleigh. In 1956, Joe Norwood published two Brown-headed Nuthatch nest box records from Charlotte.

Both of the Charlotte nest boxes had been placed in a heavily developed residential area “characterized by open lawns and second growth pine, sweetgum and poplar.” House Sparrows were nesting in many of the nest boxes in the area and were competing with the nuthatches for nesting space. Nuthatch nestlings were observed being fed in the first box on April 28, 1955, and the second box was occupied in May with fledglings leaving the nest in June. Examination of the nests indicated they were constructed of cedar bark strips, pine seed wings, vacuum cleaner lint, pine needles, and grass.

In 1959, Joe and Becky Norwood published two detailed accounts of nest box use by Brown-headed Nuthatches in Charlotte. On 24 February, the birds were engaged in courtship (“wing quivering”) and were seen inspecting different nest boxes and this continued until 9 March “when one was seen carrying material to the



*Nesting Brown-headed Nuthatches. An excluder plate prevents unwanted species from inhabiting the box. (Will Stuart)*



**Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:**  
Widespread (PR/10, CO/28)

box.” The pair began roosting in the box and four eggs were seen on 20 March, and seven eggs were laid in the nest by 23 March. The incubating female refused to flush from the box when it was opened on 31 March. The adults were seen feeding four nestlings on 7 April, and the other three eggs could not be seen. On 23 April, four birds were ready to fledge from the nest. Charlotte bird bander Bill Anderson banded the nestlings that day and they left the nest on 24 April. By 2 May, new pine seed wings and cedar bark strips were placed on top of the old nest and six new eggs were laid by 11 May. Only four of the six hatched (23 May), and the young of this second brood fledged on 10 June.

The Norwoods concluded from these multiple nesting attempts that the Brown-headed Nuthatch “prefers a natural nesting site to a man-made structure, no matter

how hazardous the location,” and “[l]acking a natural site, they will accept almost any box, regardless of its apparent unsuitability as to location and construction,” and “[t]his is a fascinating bird to study, and those who live near pine woods will find it most rewarding to put up a box of the proper dimensions.”

In 1984, ornithologist Doug McNair published a thorough analysis of Brown-headed Nuthatch clutch size and nest placement in southeastern states. In it, he calculated a mean egg date of 9 April for all states. He determined a mean clutch size of 5.11 eggs for North Carolina and 5.38 eggs for South Carolina and a 14-day incubation period after the last egg is laid. The mean cavity height was 1.5 meters (about 5 feet) off the ground. Cavities were dug by the nuthatch itself, and the bird almost always selected partially rotted wood in which to excavate.