



WILDLIFE NOTES

White-breasted nuthatch

Sitta carolinensis

Have you ever seen a white-breasted nuthatch? Look for a small, gray-backed bird that creeps down the trunk of a tree, clinging to the bark like a woodpecker but with its head pointed downward. Listen for its rapid, nasal weh-weh-weh as it appears to mutter to itself, but really converses with its mate clinging upside down on the trunk of a nearby tree. This little bird is only five to six inches long, chunky, with a gray back, white face sharply contrasting with a black cap, upturned bill, white underparts, and a stubby tail.

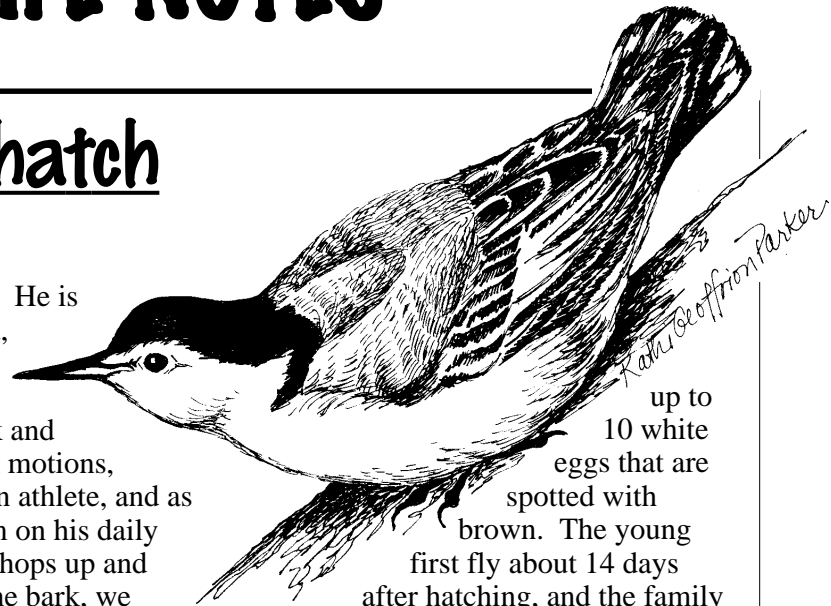
The nuthatch name apparently comes from the birds' ability to open nuts by securing them in a bark crevice and hammering with their bills, but the striking thing about them is the head-down position they usually assume while gleaning insects from bark.

Although his utilization of human attributes is usually eschewed by biologists today, A.C. Bent characterized the nuthatch in a picturesque way in his 1948 *Life Histories of North American Nuthatches, Wrens, Thrashers, and their allies*. He wrote, "The white-breasted nuthatch is a droll, earnest little bird, rather sedate and unemotional. He is no great musician and seems to lack a sense of humor. He has none of the irrepressible fidgetiness of the house wren, none of the charming happiness of the song sparrow; he appears to take life on a matter-

of-fact level. He is short-necked, broad-shouldered, sturdy, quick and sure in his motions, suggesting an athlete, and as we study him on his daily round, as he hops up and down over the bark, we see that he is an athlete with marked skill as an acrobat... as much at home upside down as right side up."

The white-breasted nuthatch is a year-round resident in New Mexico forests, bosques, or towns where there is a mixture of large trees. A mated pair often stays together through the winter foraging for spiders, insects, eggs and cocoons, sometimes out of sight from one another but keeping in touch with intermittent soft whisplings. The birds also eat acorns and other nuts, and they extract insect larvae from the nuts. They are very fond of suet and sunflower seeds provided at feeders and will often cache morsels in crevices in tree bark or under the shingles of roofs.

In the spring the male starts to sing a hollow, whistled six- to eight-note "tew-tew-tew" and may bring food to his mate. They find an old woodpecker nest, hollow out a rotted limb or even utilize a man-made bird box and build a nest of twigs, grasses and roots, often lined with fur from a dead rabbit or squirrel. A clutch size of eight is common, and the nuthatch can lay



up to 10 white eggs that are spotted with brown. The young first fly about 14 days after hatching, and the family may stay together into the fall.

At Zuni Pueblo the name for the white-breasted nuthatch is "the one who comes down head first," and the Zunis associate that head-down habit with war, considered the reverse of normal behavior. They use nuthatch feathers in a ceremony where the Salimobia kachinas come head first down the ladder into the kiva. Elsewhere in the country, the nuthatch's curious behavior has earned it other descriptive names – topsy-turvy bird and devil-down head. This little gray, creeping bird with its soft calls is also known simply as tree mouse. But no matter what name it goes by, the white-breasted nuthatch is an intriguing denizen of New Mexico's woods.

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