

White-Breasted Nuthatches

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

A favorite activity of many during the long, cold winter season is feeding the birds. Feeders stocked with seed and suet attract a variety of overwintering bird species including chickadees, tufted titmice, juncos, woodpeckers and my favorite, white breasted nuthatches. These common residents of North American deciduous forests have the most curious habit of walking down a tree trunk headfirst. They have a distinctive yammering sound and once you hear it, you’ll know they are near. Check it out at: <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/White-breasted_Nuthatch/sounds>

White-breasted nuthatches have a distinctive appearance as well. These 5-inch long birds sport blue-grey feathers on their backs, black on their crowns and the back of their necks, a snowy white breast and undersides with a rusty patch on their lower bellies. Males and females are colored similarly but the females are duller.

Insects are a main part of the nuthatch’s diet. As they clamber up and down a tree’s trunk and main branches, they are searching cracks and crevices for tasty meals. Insects known to serve as food include weevils, borers, beetles, ants, caterpillars, and scale. Nuthatches also feed on a variety of nuts and seeds. The larger ones, such as acorns, are jammed into a crevice allowing the bird to crack it open. It is believed that the name, nuthatch, was derived from this behavior. Typically, a nuthatch feeds on insects during the growing season and mostly seed during the winter.

Sunflower seeds and suet work well to attract these birds especially during the winter when insects are scarce. Much like squirrels, white breasted nuthatches are known to cache their food when more is available to them, as is the case with bird feeders. Extra seeds are stored in bark crevices and often covered with another piece of bark, moss, lichen or whatever is available. Trees with furrowed bark are sought out for this purpose.

White-breasted nuthatches typically live in pairs year-round and are territorial. A pair’s territory may run up to 3 dozen acres in wooded areas and up to 50 acres in more open locations. In the wintertime, however, they may travel from their territory to visit bird feeders, often foraging in mixed species flocks with chickadees and titmice.

Their preferred nesting site is in a tree cavity or old woodpecker hole. It is not clear if the male or female selects the site but the pair will continue to nest there in future years. Occasionally nest boxes are used. The female builds the nest by first lining the nest cavity with clods of soil, bark and fur. Then she constructs a nest cup of feathers, fine bark, fine grass and other soft materials.

Between 5 and 9 three quarter inch, creamy white speckled eggs are laid. The eggs hatch after 12 to 14 days. Only the female incubates the eggs. The male nuthatch will bring food to the sitting female. When the young hatch, both parents will feed them. They are ready to leave the nest in about 26 days and will stay with the parents for a few weeks and then find territories and mates of their own.

Keep an eye out for these agile little birds. Watch them as they wind their way along tree trunks and branches climbing up, down and around as they search for insects or places to cache their seeds. Keep your bird feeders stocked up and enjoy your feathered visitors during these cold January days as we wait for spring.

For gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.

