

Bird Watch on the Palmer Divide

Nuthatches help maintain a healthy forest



By Elizabeth Hacker

Fall has arrived on the Palmer Divide and many birds are migrating. If you keep your eyes to the night sky, you may see and hear them. During the day they need to rest and refuel. The best time to look for them is early morning or late afternoon before they take flight.

One species of birds that can be found year-round on the Palmer Divide is the nuthatch. I tend to notice them in greater numbers during the winter. A nuthatch is not considered a migratory bird, but it moves around a small range, up and down in elevation. In summer, they can be found at 10,000 feet but in winter, they move down in altitude to as low as 5,000 feet.

Nuthatches belong to the genus *Sitta*, a family of small passerine birds characterized by large heads, short tails, and powerful bills and feet. Of the five nuthatch species in North America, including the red-breasted, white-breasted, pygmy, and brown-headed nuthatches, and the brown creeper, four can be found in northern El Paso County. Only the brown-headed nuthatch, native to the Southeastern coastal forests, is not found here.

Nuthatches are agile birds that creep up and down the trunks of trees and large branches. They use their long, pointed slender beaks to probe into tree bark in search of insects like the pine beetle. The health of a forest depends on birds like the nuthatch that survive on massive numbers of insects that can be harmful to the trees.

Size and shape

Nuthatches are all small birds that may appear to have similar features, but to birders they are all uniquely different.

The white-breasted is the largest nuthatch at 5.75 inches in length, weighing three-quarters of an ounce, with a wingspan of 11 inches. Its upper body is a light gray, its underside is white, and the top of its head is black.

In comparison, the pygmy nuthatch, the smallest species, is 4 inches in length, weighing less than a half an ounce, with a wingspan of 8 inches. It looks very similar to the white-breasted, but its head is gray and it moves faster.

The red-breasted nuthatch is a medium-size nuthatch with gray upper feathers, black on top of its head, with a rust-colored underbody and a distinctive black eyeline.

The brown creeper is the color of tree bark and unless it is moving, it can be difficult to see.

Behavior

Nuthatches are little birds, but they are feisty and always very busy. They crawl up, down, and around a tree, flicking off bits of bark as they poke their beaks under the bark in search of hidden insects.

In winter, nuthatch pairs roost together. Juveniles from the previous nesting season join their parents. Sometimes as many as 150 individual birds will sleep together in a single tree. On cold winter nights, to preserve heat and protect themselves from strong wind, they huddle together in pyramid or a square-shaped bundle.

Nesting

Nuthatches are cavity nesters. They often build their nest in a discarded woodpecker hole or a wren house. Clutches are large and average eight to 12 eggs. Parents



Above: Pygmy nuthatch. Photo by Elizabeth Hacker.



Above: A white-breasted nuthatch uses its slender bill to remove insects from under the bark of a ponderosa pine branch. Photo by Elizabeth Hacker.

take turns sitting on the eggs. The eggs hatch about 15 days after the last egg is laid. Chicks fledge the nest 15 days after they are hatched.

One summer, we had a pair of pygmy nuthatches brood 12 chicks in a wren house attached to our house. As the chicks grew, the wren house was not large enough for all 12 of them. The chicks were not yet ready to fly so with their small but strong woodpecker-like feet, they clung to the side of the house. As one chick would climb back into the nesting house, another chick would be forced out. Early one evening, with their parents in the lead, all 12 chicks flew from their tiny house. We watched them as they flew back and forth over our yard, chattering away. When it got dark, they returned to the house, and as the last chick went in another was forced out. A day later, the chicks fledged the nest and went into a nearby tree. They seemed like happy birds and it was a delight to watch them.

Attracting nuthatches

I often talk to people who don't want nuthatches in their yard because they say that nuthatches destroyed their cedar siding by drilling holes into it. Several years ago, we also had this problem and felt the same. Our cedar siding was peppered with nuthatch holes. We were frustrated but learned that as siding ages, the wood attracts insects and can become infested. That made sense because we had lived there nearly 20 years without noticing any holes. We decided we couldn't blame the birds, so we replaced the siding and eliminated the problem. Siding doesn't last forever, no matter what the warranty might claim.

In winter, I put out suet for the woodpeckers and nuthatches, but until recently, it seemed most of the suet went to feeding the magpies, jays, and squirrels. At a Wild Birds Unlimited store, I found a suet feeder designed so that nuthatches and woodpeckers must go under the feeder to get at the suet. Because nuthatches can eat upside-down and squirrels and magpies can't, this type of feeder works very well. Nuthatches also eat small seeds, but their slender beaks are not able to crack open a shell on a seed or nut.

While nuthatches work hard to protect the trees in our forests, they can only remove insects to help protect individual trees. They can't maintain the forest understory.

Fire and the health of forests

In the distant past, fires acted to clean the forest of underbrush and competition from tree seeds sprouts. The thick bark of mature pines protects the trees from fire. The Forest Service conducts controlled burns in many areas but, as more houses are built in the forest, controlled fire burns are no longer a safe way to control overgrown forests.

In August, smoke from Western wildfires clouded our skies. We may have dodged a bullet this year, but wildfire is a very real and present danger for people who live in a forest. Many areas of Black Forest are thick with spindly trees too dense to walk through. Forested subdivisions from Woodmoor west to the Rampart Range are filled with mature stands of scrub oak and tall, grassy underbrush. Could it be that residents are unaware of these potentially dangerous hazards?

Recently, a friend invited me to bird with her at her home in Daniel's Park near Parker. Unlike most of the forests I'm familiar with in northern El Paso, the forest in her backyard was open with well-spaced, tall ponderosa pines. The understory was free of scrub oak, long grasses, and brush.

When I asked my friend why her forest was so open, she explained that in 2017, her homeowners' association hired a shepherd with a lot of goats and a few dogs to clear out the brush for fire suppression. She said the goats got the job done in a few days. Her initial thought was that all the wildlife had left and never would return. However, after a few weeks, she noticed an increase in birds and other wildlife including a Lewis woodpecker, warblers, nuthatches, owls, and bobcats. Goats might be something to consider!

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High Altitude Nature and Gardening (HANG)

Garden's success shows value of "lazy" methods

By Janet Sellers

The corn is as high as an elephant's eye—and everything is growing great at the Monument Community Garden on Beacon Lite Road. Even the cucumbers are blooming at a mere 6 inches tall. Recent rain brought such good moisture and nitrogen into the soil that the plants just bolt out of the ground. And we are getting those giant zucchinis that will be very tasty stuffed with rice and goodies.

I brought my art students of all ages to the Community Garden to visit and learn how we do things in this garden. They were fascinated with the Olla terracotta pot watering system and all the varieties of things we are growing as a demonstration garden. It's one way we can show what can be done at our altitude.

The interesting thing is that with the right situation of homemade composted soil and care, this garden proved it could work at any altitude. Also, when I harvest lettuce or other crops, they're so clean I hardly have to wash dirt off anything, and there are no bugs thanks to the spearmint and marigolds as bugs dislike the scents and skip the garden. And did I mention that the way we planned with the "lazy gardening method" we've had bumper crops but next to no weeds all season?

An important thing to remember is to be a lazy gardener this fall, which will protect our good bugs and soil and the birds and other critters that we need to keep our environment healthy, balanced, and safe to live in. Being a good lazy gardener means leaving many things in place over the fall and winter.

I will talk more about that in October, and I will again relate how to use the pine needles that fall from ponderosa this time of year in a number of environmentally friendly ways—right on your property. Using pine needles in the landscape or turning them into soil benefits our forests and pines, keeping the trees healthy. And it's a lot easier than bagging up pine needles.

In September, we can still plant some of our favorite cool weather crops such as salad greens, beets, and dark greens. Friends rave about fried green tomatoes, so I think I will try that. Our nights have been so cool the tomatoes are staying green.

Janet Sellers is an avid practitioner of lazy gardening aka productive yet fuss-free permaculture gardening. She can be reached at JanetSellers@ocn.me.



Above: Watercolor artist Vicki Kay enjoys painting amid the beautiful sunflowers at Monument Community Garden. The sunflowers created a barrier to roadside pollutants and possible lawn chemicals nearby and protected the organic garden from bugs and weeds as well. Photo by Janet Sellers.