

BOGDIVERSITY THURSDAY



—*from Head Naturalist Clinton*

Red and White-breasted Nuthatches

POST #59—February 9, 2023

Bird diversity in the Northwoods during the winter is slight compared to summer bird diversity. There are only a few species that stick around during the depths of winter and most of these species are specially adapted to deal with cold temperatures and scarce food options. Today, let's take a look at two fairly common species in our region during the winter: Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches!

Nuthatches are a really great group of birds. Most of the diversity of nuthatches is found outside of North America, with especially diverse nuthatch communities in Southeast Asia. In the United States there are four species of nuthatch: Red-breasted, White-breasted, Pygmy, and Brown-headed. You can find both Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches in the Sax-Zim Bog. In Minnesota, Red-breasted Nuthatch is primarily found in the northeastern part of the state, as they are strongly associated with coniferous trees. White-breasted Nuthatch is quite widespread and be found in most habitats throughout the state.

Most (in fact nearly all) nuthatches never migrate and can be found year-round in their preferred habitats.

Red-breasted Nuthatches are really interesting birds. Not only do they occur further north than all other nuthatches in the US, they are one of the few species of nuthatch to undergo a migration. Typically, Red-breasted Nuthatches do not migrate very far and usually more of an irruptive species. If you follow along with the Winter Finch Forecast, this is why you find Red-breasted Nuthatch listed among the winter finches in the forecast. Red-breasted Nuthatch migration is really fun to watch! Because they are so small, with short wings, they are not able to make very strong flights for long distances. When migrating, they typically make very short flights between the tops of tall trees. They will often take time to pause and look around before embarking on another short flight. Their movements are tied to conifer cone crops, usually upland species. Because this species migrates or irrupts, it is also the only North American Nuthatch to have occurred in Europe. Iceland, United Kingdom, and Germany all have records of Red-breasted Nuthatch, with Germany's record occurring fall/early winter of 2022!

White-breasted Nuthatch does not occur very far north, with its northern limit in the middle reaches of Canada, but it does occur much farther south than Red-breasted Nuthatch, reaching its southern limits in Mexico. Though Red-breasted Nuthatch is as widespread as White-breasted Nuthatch, only White-breasted Nuthatch has noticeable differences across its range. There are at least three subspecies of White-breasted Nuthatch, with one

subspecies in the eastern US and two-three subspecies in the western US and into Mexico. White-breasted Nuthatch is not as gregarious as Red-breasted Nuthatch and is usually not as strongly associated with other bird species, including other White-breasted Nuthatches. Deciduous and mixed forests are the preferred habitats of this species, but in the Sax-Zim Bog we also find them using Black Spruce and Tamarack forests as well!

These charismatic bird species are found in wild and urban spaces alike and are hopefully familiar to most visitors to the Sax-Zim Bog! More information about these species can be found in the photos below!

(Photos by Sparky Stensaas)



Male and female nuthatches are fairly easy to identify, all you need to do is look at the cap! Males typically have black caps, with females having a paler, almost blue-gray cap. This male Red-breasted Nuthatch also shows the bright orangey underside that gives this species its name.



This female Red-breasted Nuthatch is foraging along the branches of an old conifer. A gregarious species, Red-breasted Nuthatch can often be found foraging in small family groups, mixed species flocks with warblers and chickadees, or even with woodpeckers!



Nuthatches forage from the top of a tree toward the bottom. This male White-breasted Nuthatch is in the classic nuthatch pose, while he waits to drop down to a bird feeder.



The caps of female White-breasted Nuthatches are a lovely pale blue. This female looks to be investigating a crevice in the tree for insects or perhaps an old cache!



Nuthatches are cavity nesters! This male Red-breasted Nuthatch was displaying near his newly excavated cavity close to the Welcome Center, in hopes of attracting a female.