

The Surprise Nuthatch

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South Russell is a small village in Geauga County where I have lived all my life. As a kid growing up in a rural setting, it seemed inevitable that I would become interested in nature, particularly birds. With a variety of habitats on our 38 acres of land, there was always an interesting assortment of songbirds and waterfowl to view throughout the year. I became quite good at identifying them. I wish I could attribute the sighting of a particular bird on 21 November 2001 to keen observational skills, but actually it had more to do with dumb luck and being in the right place at the right time when a small bird with a brown cap landed on the feeder just outside the kitchen window.

The first day the brown-headed nuthatch appeared at the feeder, the most obvious field mark was its brown cap and the pale splotch on the back of its neck. Its underparts were pale or whitish, its back and wings were blue/gray. It had the typical nuthatch body shape, and appeared only a tad smaller than nearby red-breasted nuthatches. It behaved like a nuthatch as well. We watched it climb headfirst down the side of the feeder. Then, it jumped to the suet basket and was eating suet upside-down. It inspected the peanut feeder and the sunflower seed mixture. It placed a seed in one of the crevices on the feeder and pounded on it. The bird came frequently to the feeder all day the first day, preferring to eat the suet, then the peanuts, and lastly, the sunflower seeds. In the ensuing weeks, however, its taste changed from the suet to the sunflower seed. It would make short trips to the feeder and pick through the seeds, tossing them aside until it found a black oil sunflower seed to its liking. Then it would fly off into one of the three white oak trees in the back yard. Placing the seed under a piece of bark, it would hammer on it and eat it up there. Occasionally, it would forage up and down an oak's trunk or along the limbs.

Between its trips back and forth to the feeder, it sometimes sang or gave a call note. Its song is very un-nuthatch-like; sort of squeaky phrases, some of them like the "dee-dee-dee" parts of a Chickadee song but higher. The call note was distinctive, too, a sharp "kip," but with different harmonics. It is hard to describe. Learning its voice, though, was a useful way to locate the bird when it wasn't at the feeder or in the oak trees. The nuthatch was certainly not intimidated by the presence of people. It would come to the feeder even if I was working around my little pond only 15 feet away, nor did the number of visiting birders gawking at it through binoculars, scopes, and cameras seem to bother it.

I am certainly not a bird expert, but I am a very careful birder. I like to have a really good look at a bird before it gets a check mark on my list. The bird feeder is only a couple feet from the kitchen window, allowing great, close-range observations. The bird appeared to be a perfect match to the picture in the Peterson field guide. The only thing that didn't match was the bird's range, but sometimes, I knew, birds get misplaced. After studying the new bird for some time, I was certain it was a brown-headed nuthatch so it was with pure innocence that I reported it to the rare bird hotline. I was totally ignorant of the fact that the brown-headed nuthatch had

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not been seen in Ohio since the 1800s*, until I received a phone call from the man who posts the bird sightings on the phone line. When he told me about its rare status, I was worried that no one would believe that I'd seen it. Luckily, my brother had taken some digital pictures of the bird while it was on the feeder. We didn't think the pictures were very good, but apparently they were intriguing enough that an expert wanted to come out and have a look. Fortunately, Larry Rosche was sitting at our kitchen table on 23 November when the brown-headed nuthatch landed on the feeder right in front of him. He was able to confirm my sighting.

That is when everything started "hitting the fan," and the significance of what I had seen began to sink in. Later the same afternoon, some people on the Ohio Bird Records Committee were sitting in the kitchen waiting for the bird to show up. It did not. In the following days, various people from Columbus (including the editor of this journal) and other parts of Ohio, as well as people from Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky came to our house hoping to see this tiny bird. The nuthatch did not make an appearance for an entire week, even though the birders did. When it appeared again, it seemed to follow a routine of making morning visits to the bird feeder and oak trees. Finally, the visiting birders began to get some good looks at it. My parents and I have been very amused by the fanatical interest this bird has generated. Some of the people on the records committee finally got to see it on their fourth or fifth trip to our house—a three-hour drive each way! Someone else tallied fifteen hours of waiting before seeing it! We have met some really great folks, though, and it has been very satisfying to share the brown-headed nuthatch with bird watchers from near and far.

**Ed. note:* The author refers here to a specimen J. P. Kirtland reported collecting in Ohio sometime prior to 1838. Accepted by older authorities, the OBRC does not recognize it. For Kirtland's report see our previous issue, *The Ohio Cardinal* 24(4):199. 🐦



The discovery of this brown-headed nuthatch (rear view) caused quite a stir at the Gilberts' home in Geauga County late this season. Photo by Warren Gilbert on 21 November 2001.