

Green Scene: The Upside Down Bird

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[photograph]

[caption: In areas with mature trees, red-breasted nuthatches are often frequent visitors at bird feeders.
Dudley Booth photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: Nuts about the upside-down bird]

One of the birds I enjoy watching in our backyard this time of the year is the red-breasted nuthatch. Always on the move and often hanging upside down to reach a seed, the nuthatch derives its name from its habit of wedging a seed or nut into crevices of bark on a tree and then hacking away to pry it open. In truth, it is a nut-hack rather than a nuthatch. Although it rarely stays motionless long enough for a good look, the striking black and white stripes on its head and rusty-coloured breast and belly make the red-breasted nuthatch easy to identify.

With an abundance of coniferous trees, local residential areas and parks provide excellent habitat for this colourful and acrobatic little bird. Nuthatches seem to prefer mature forests that are slightly on the dry side. For example, red-breasted nuthatches are reported to be far less common in wet rain forests on the west side of Vancouver Island than they are on the drier east side. Like woodpeckers they are often observed on the trunk of a tree rather than perched on a branch like most birds. Unlike woodpeckers, nuthatches specialize in moving down the trunk of tree. With a stubby tail, strong legs and long claws, they are well-equipped to move headfirst down a tree trunk in search of spiders and insects that might escape the attention of other birds, such as woodpeckers, that can only forage in an upwards direction.

The dry forests in the interior of southern BC attract three species of nuthatches, a fact which makes this area a hotspot for nuthatches in Canada. In addition to the red-breasted nuthatch, Ponderosa pines attract the so-called pygmy nuthatch that is, in reality, only a little smaller than the red-breasted. Mature deciduous forests appeal to the larger white-breasted nuthatch.

As might be expected for birds that prefer mature forests, all three species of nuthatches nest in tree cavities. Red-breasted nuthatches, with a small but sturdy bill, usually excavate their own cavities in the wood of decaying trees but occasionally will use an abandoned woodpecker cavity. More rarely, red-breasted nuthatches take advantage of man-made nest boxes. One summer, we were delighted when a pair of nuthatches decided to take up residence in a nest box we installed in our yard for tree swallows. Red-breasted nuthatches usually dab a little sticky pitch or sap obtained from a tree around their nest hole especially on the bottom side; this is thought to deter potential predators. Sure enough, the nest box in our yard soon had bits of fluff and strands of spider webs on the bottom side of the hole where this material had become caught in the sticky pitch.

Red-breasted nuthatches live here year-round but local populations may increase in the fall when nuthatches that have nested further north in spruce forests fly south for the winter months. Some of these migrants may stay here for the entire winter while others may be only passing through this time of

year to winter a little further south. This makes the fall migration period one of the best times of the year to see red-breasted nuthatches in local forests.

Nuthatches can be readily enticed to use bird feeders. They like to feed on both suet and sunflower seeds. Unlike finches that will perch at length on a feeder and stuff themselves with seeds, nuthatches employ a snatch and dash strategy. They will quickly fly in to take a single seed and then promptly leave to either stash it for later or eat it in a more private setting safe from the watch of larger birds.

Remember, if you are feeding birds in your backyard, the local bear population is not yet hibernating. If you reside in an area frequented by bears, you should withhold your food for a few more weeks or place feeders in areas well beyond the reach of bears.