

White-breasted Nuthatch

I HAVE SEEN THE WHITE-BREASTED Nuthatch (WbN) on a dead juniper near my house, and also on my log suet feeder. But I have more reliably seen this bird on the tall deciduous trees near the ECLA buildings. This medium-size resident is 5.57 inches long with a wingspan of 11 inches. Its shape is rather long and squat with a long head and slightly upturned beak. It has a white face, dark eyes, black crown stripe, gray wings and back, white belly, dark tail showing some striping and a reddish-brown color on the underside of a relatively short tail.

Its feet are strong with long claws, one toe to back, three to front, to enable tree climbing/feeding. Males and females are similar. Often, the bird is seen facing downward on a tree trunk. The bird is found throughout the United States and is divided into three populations—Pacific, interior west and eastern. The coloration of the three populations are quite similar but their songs are different.

Both male and female pick and furbish their nest in a deserted woodpecker hole or other cavity in a

tree, usually well off the ground. They are reported to sweep the edge of the nest hole with noxious-smelling insects. The female is courted with food, bowing and wing fluttering. Five to eight eggs are laid by the monogamous pair. Helpless young hatch at 12 days and fledge in 14 days (but I also found fledging time at 26 days).

The diet consists of insects, seeds and nuts, although chicks received mostly (or all) insects. In the fall, WbN cache nuts and insects for later meals. The pairs stay in their territory year round but do not roost together during winter. WbN might be seen during winter with flocks of chickadees. (During last winter, Santa Fe seemed to have an unusually large population of mountain chickadees.)

WbN is a small song bird and not closely related to woodpeckers. Ten million WbN are estimated to populate the United States. The nuthatch name originated in Europe from the bird's habit of wedging a nut into a bark crevice and hammering it with its bill to open it.



—Pam Hertine