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What a long year the past few months have been. For many people, the “opportunity” to spend more time at home has brought a new awareness of their neighbors—the critters that visit or dwell in their backyards. Here at Watching Backyard Birds and Bird Watcher’s Digest, we’ve seen a surge of new subscribers, insanely busy web traffic, an increase in questions and email about birds, and, in general, a measurable increase in interest in wild birds. Those of us who have enjoyed backyard bird watching for years or decades are secretly wondering why it took the newcomers so long to discover this fascinating, rewarding, fun, and shareable pastime.

For those new to this hobby: Welcome! And a warning: Bird watching can be addictive and time-consuming. But get ready—activity at your feeders will pick up as natural food sources wane and autumn progresses. And if you find that rewarding, I encourage you to look beyond your bird feeders and into the shrubs and foliage in your yard. Look at the sky above your yard, and listen for sounds you haven’t heard before.

When I lived in southern Indiana, even though I maintained a bunch of diverse feeding stations and a heavily used birdbath, my biggest backyard birding thrills were elsewhere. Each fall, I delighted at the first hearing of a distant yodel: sandhill cranes heading south. I could run outside, gauge the flight direction, and sometimes enjoy a long, noisy V of huge birds passing overhead. (Yes, I did count sandhill crane as a yardbird even though they only occupied airspace.)

Once, a male black-throated blue warbler landed on a tree branch not far from my bird feeders while I was nearby. As an insectivore, it wasn’t tempted by my diverse seed offerings. Maybe it was on its way to my birdbath, but my presence discouraged it. What a thrill for me, though!

Fall migration is so much more than hummingbirds departing and juncos arriving. Especially in the early fall, look beyond your feeders for visitors from the north passing through. You might be in for some wonderful surprises—in your own backyard.

Dawn Hewitt
WBB team captain
YOUR EYES WORK GREAT WHAT ABOUT YOUR BINOCULARS?

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Birding icon Roger Tory Peterson identified the white-breasted nuthatch as one of the species that sparked his lifelong passion for birds. Time has not diminished the appeal of the nuthatch, and for many bird watchers the appearance of one at the feeder is a highlight.

It isn’t easy to understand the hold the white-breasted nuthatch has on us. Certainly it is not merely appearance. The white-breasted is dapper enough, with its blue-gray upperparts, white underparts, and black or gray cap. Neat, but hardly gaudy.

No one physical attribute leaps out, either. It is a fairly small bird with a fine, pointed, slightly upturned bill. The short legs and the fact that it is more long than tall emphasizes a sleek and dashing look. Nice, but hardly arresting.

The voice is not one to inspire composers. The most common call is a nasal but oddly pleasing yank, given singly or in a rapid series when the bird is excited or agitated. It is distinctive, and you have to like any bird with so recognizable a call, but no writers gush about the vocal ability of the white-breasted nuthatch.

Eirik A.T. Blom
**Attractive Behavior**

This leaves behavior as the main attraction, which is likely part of the bird’s appeal. Almost everyone knows this about the nuthatch: It feeds by going headfirst down tree trunks—a habit nearly unique in the avian world. While the rest of the bird world goes up, or flits from branch to branch, or grubs about on the ground, the nuthatch goes down. Perhaps the headfirst descent embodies our general sense of the species—a bird simply being itself, with the flock but not part of it, neither social nor antisocial, neither a leader nor a follower. Even on its forays to the feeder or the suet block the nuthatch seems little interested in other birds, focused on the task at hand. Perhaps it is, in the end, the combination of all things nuthatch that makes us stop and take a second look.

White-breasted nuthatches may not be especially social, although in winter one or two can often be found in the local flock of chickadees and titmice, but when it comes to their mates they are faithful. They are believed to mate for life, although that concept does not always mean for birds what it does for humans. Among birds, including many that mate for life, the bonds can be strong unless the breeding season is a failure. When that happens, the pair is likely to part, seeking what they presumably hope is a more successful partner.

Despite being widespread and fairly common, they are little studied. For one thing, white-breasted nuthatches are spread out and fairly numerous. Territories are large, and the nests in natural cavities high in deciduous trees are hard to find and access. It is much easier to study birds that stay in clumps and whose nests are accessible.

**WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH**

- *Sitta carolinensis*

**SIZE & DESCRIPTION**

- 5 ¾ inches long
- Black cap over white face and breast

**VOICE**

- Song is series of nasal whistles on one pitch: what-what-what
- Call is nasal yank that varies in pitch across races

**RANGE**

- Common across North America

**CHARACTER**

- Acrobatic climber
Movements Unknown

One reason white-breasted nuthatches are not found in groups, even in the winter, is that pairs typically remain on territory year-round, even in the coldest parts of the range. They are not regular migrants, but in some years there are movements, irruptions of sorts, as birds from the north move south. We know almost nothing about the size or frequency of these movements. Birds may move more frequently than we think, but how would we know? Even in irruption years they are typically encountered in ones and twos rather than flocks. Banding has not helped much, because not only do observers rarely see the bands, they rarely see the legs of a nuthatch. Short and tucked between the bird’s belly and the tree trunk, they are nearly invisible.

We do know that there is some movement in the fall, if only because birds regularly show up at feeders in neighborhoods where they were not found during the summer. That may partly be the result of natural winter wandering in search of food, but some of it is surely the result of young birds dispersing from their parents’ territories.

Seed Cacher

When you see a nuthatch at the feeder, the most striking thing about it is its industriousness. For an hour or two at a time the bird comes and goes every minute or so, especially if you are providing sunflower seeds. They dash in,
grab a seed, and dash off in their distinctive, undulating, woodpeckerlike flight. In a minute they are back, grabbing another. They are not gorging themselves; they are stockpiling. White-breasted nuthatches cache seeds in the bark of trees, often near their nighttime roost in winter or near the nest cavity in spring and summer. These larders serve as a hedge against times of shortage, and nuthatches can be diligent at keeping them filled.

They do eat some of the seeds, of course, and if you are lucky the bird will not fly far from the feeder to eat. Then you can watch it hack open the seed with its sharp bill, which is how it got the name nuthatch (nuthack). Even in this activity it seems determined, purposeful, and little interested in the hustle and bustle around it.

**Food and Habitat**

White-breasted nuthatches show a definite fondness for sunflower seeds, but they are also especially attracted to suet and peanut butter—high-fat and high-protein foods that mimic the insects they eat in spring and summer. Almost anywhere on the continent south of the boreal forests (the largely treeless expanses of the Great Plains, the open lands of Texas and the Great Basin, and Florida being the primary exceptions) you can attract a white-breasted nuthatch to your feeder with sunflower and suet. For habitat, all that is required is old, thick, deciduous trees. Even in nesting season the birds can be found in suburban communities if there are enough large trees.

Whatever the appeal, few of us can resist stopping and watching when a white-breasted nuthatch appears at the feeder. And, watching it, we are perhaps not so surprised that it has caught the eye and the imagination of so many watchers before us. 🦉
Four species of nuthatches reside in North America:

- **White-breasted** is found coast-to-coast and is nonmigratory.
- **Red-breasted** is a year-round resident of the West and from Alaska to Newfoundland, but a winter visitor east of the Rocky Mountains.
- **Pygmy** is found in coniferous forests in the West and does not migrate.
- **Brown-headed** is a year-round denizen of pine forests in the Southeast.

All nuthatches have short tails and long bills, and uniquely climb headfirst down tree trunks, glean- ing insects from under the bark.

Nuthatches nest in cavities. Male and female pygmy and brown-headed nuthatches are identical, but male and female red-breasted and white-breasted nuthatches can be distinguished: Females are duller in color.

Attract nuthatches to your yard by offering sunflower seeds, peanuts, or suet.
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Great Tit. Collided with glass in the UK. © Mark Sweeney

October 5 - 11 2020

Bird-building collisions are a leading cause of bird deaths worldwide. Help save these birds by participating in this annual global event held by FLAP Canada.
Short Stories from Al

I’m Gullible

A farmer brought me a gull. It had flown into the window of the cab on the man’s tractor. Glass is like Kryptonite to a gull.

The ag-head thought the gull was a goner. He threw it into his pickup. He was going to check a field guide for identification. The gull came to in the truck. It flopped around a bit, but didn’t appear to be able to fly.

My morning had not yet shed its training wheels when the farmer brought the bird to me because he thought
that I needed a gull.

I live in flyover land—not just for people from New York and Los Angeles, but for gulls as well. Gulls do spend time here before their arrival at their destinations (lakes). They follow tractors that are busily altering the landscape. The gulls eat grubs and other goodies the tractors free from the soil.

I was not then nor am I now a licensed wildlife rehabilltator (I don’t even play one on TV), but sometimes a man has to do what a man has to do—as long as his wife hasn’t told him otherwise.

My need for an injured gull wasn’t that great, but I don’t know how to be uninvolved. I took the gull gift in the spirit that it was given. I sympathized with the bird, as I have walked into a glass patio door. It stung like the dickens. Curse that effective glass cleaner.

I didn’t know the sex of the bird, but I declared him a male based on his many disgusting habits. I named him Jethro Gull. The name meant nothing to the gull, as he wasn’t going to come no matter what I called him. He had a personality. Not unlike that weird cousin we all have with the cantankerous disposition who is confused by the plot twists in a Bugs Bunny cartoon. Gulls have a reputation of being noisy creatures, but this one was a good listener.

I rigged up an old pigeon cage and the gull moved about his large-for-most-birds-but-small-for-him cage. It was a bed and breakfast for a gull. He was always happy to see me unless I didn’t bring food. I didn’t have any Purina Gull Chow on hand, but fortunately a gull will eat pretty much anything. I fed Jethro some Wonder Bread—because it helps build strong bodies 12 ways. I gave him corn and various kinds of large insects.

We bonded. I became more of a gull than I had been. This was a big improvement. The gull became more of a human—a possible step backward for the bird.

The gull thrived. His strength returned. I think it was the Wonder Bread that did the trick. Jethro became very vocal. I don’t speak gull and his English wasn’t the best, but I concluded that he wanted to be returned to the wild. I examined his wings. They seemed to be in good shape. I reasoned that the gull’s problems could have been psychosomatic. He thought he couldn’t fly. I read books to the gull about the power of positive thinking. I made the determination that I would release him near the site of the accident. Free Gully.

I drove my pickup, with the caged gull in the back, to the field where the gull had been injured. I have no doubt that
Jethro considered it a return to the scene of the crime. I opened the door of the cage. The gull did not venture out hesitantly. He bolted through the exit and took flight. He circled over my head. Actually he figure-eighted over my head, squawking loudly.

The field wasn’t far from my house. For a few weeks, the bird would fly in and squawk until I fed him. He would figure-eight over my head. He made an odd sound that I didn’t hear from other gulls. He became my buddy. He would dip his right wing as a signal before landing on my shoulder and nuzzling my ear. He whispered sweet nothings in my ear. He must have known that I had saved his life.

Then one day, he didn’t show up. I assume he had migrated. I missed him.

Nearly a year passed. That’s what nearly all years do. Then one day, I was walking to my pickup when I heard that odd squawking. I looked up, and there was a gull doing a figure-eight over my head. Jethro! I rejoiced. It flew closer and I smiled as I readied myself for my old friend to land on my shoulder. It didn’t land on my shoulder. It pooped right in my eye. It probably wasn’t Jethro.

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**BIRD Bites**

*Tidbits of Backyard Info You Can Use!*

Lesser goldfinches are attracted to moving water.

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**Move That Water**

Birdbaths can attract species that have no interest in the food stuffs humans offer. Warblers, flycatchers, even vireos can turn up in your “public bath.” The odds of attracting such uncommon visitors—including fall migrants leisurely heading south—improve when the water moves. Bubblers, misters, drippers, recirculating fountains, even water wigglers can be irresistible to songbirds and even hummingbirds. Just keep the water fresh and scrub the container every few days to prevent algal buildup.
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