

REMARKS ABOUT THE WHITE BELLIED NUTHATCH (*SITTA CAROLINENSIS*).

By JOHN N. CLARK.

Perhaps among our common birds there is no more interesting species than the little white Bellied Nuthatch *Sitta carolinensis* with their odd ways and quaint and peculiar notes. An inimitable gymnast, travelling with equal ease upward or downward, perching on the branch or under, it everywhere at home like a fly on the ceiling, always busy, always contented, the same in Summer's heat or Winter's cold, skipping along in short leaps instead of walking over the trunk and among the branches of the trees, peeping into every crack or crevice in the bark, under every sprig of moss or lichen and woe betide the caterpillar moth or chrysalis however carefully concealed therein. I was very much amused last winter with watching a pair of birds of this species in an Oak tree near my house that had numbers of acorns which they would gather and secure in some crevice, then peck at the shell till they obtained the meat within, this was a frequent occurrence during the cold weather. The mature birds always go mated at all seasons of the year; I never saw a bird of this species alone, if one is seen be sure the mate is not far away, and I do not remember seeing more than a pair except it were a family of young and yet they are social birds almost invariably keeping in company with more or less Titmice and Woodpeckers.

It is a pretty little bird neatly though not gaily dressed, with a mantle of soft bluish ash, a glossy black crown which extends down the nape, the throat and under parts white as are also the cheeks extending on the sides of the neck and over the eye in sharp contrast with the black of the crown, the under tail coverts and flanks are rusty brown. The tail which is very short and broad extending but little beyond the long pointed wings, consists of twelve feathers, the outer ones black at the base and tips with a broad patch of white between, the next three

similar with the black of the base more and more extended in each, till, in the fifth the black covers all except a white tip, the two centre feathers are colored like the back blueish gray. The hood in the female is but little darker than the back. The length of the bird is about six inches. Common as it is here I collected a good many years before I succeeded in securing a set of its eggs. In 1881 about the middle of June I observed a brood of young in my orchard, they had apparently but just left the nest but I was unable to find the site of it, I made a note of the fact however and resolved to keep my eyes open another Spring and watch for them. In 1882 they were there as anticipated, and about the first week in May I set myself to watch a male bird which long eluded me but nearer and nearer I traced him gathering food for his mate, at last he flew to the tree where the nest was located and immediately I saw the female meet him and take the food he had brought; then, as I transferred my attentions to her, she began skipping around among the branches in the most indifferent manner imaginable, but perseverance conquered at last and I saw her slip into a little round knot-hole in a large green branch and the secret was out. In a short time the male came again and the same manoeuvres were repeated, it was all very plain now, except how to get the coveted eggs — however, armed with a ladder and all necessary paraphernalia I invested the fortress — imagine my disappointment at finding a brood of callow young, this was the 8th. of May and the next day making a trip into the woods I found two more Nuthatch nests in the same way and with the same result, each containing young, apparently just from the shell. One was in the trunk of a large Elm about twelve feet from the ground and the other in an Oak, the entrance to the hole in the trunk being only about eighteen inches from the ground. Making note of my discoveries I prepared to watch and wait, but success met me sooner than anticipated for, on the 7th. day of June passing the Elm a rap on it with a stick brought out the female Nuthatch and investigation disclosed a fine set of fresh eggs seven in number which proves that the bird does sometimes lay a second set, neither of the other birds did so however. In 1883 with large expectations I watched the old nests. One in the Apple tree was deserted but the one in the Oak was early taken possession of by a pair of birds and on the 22nd. of April I had the satisfaction of finding the set completed with seven fresh eggs. Visiting the nest in the Elm I found a Squirrel

had taken possession and built a nest of finely pulverized bark in it. At a subsequent visit I found a pair of Nuthatches pulling out the fragments of the squirrel's nest by piecemeal — they would go in one at a time, seize a mouthful of the fragments and run out on the side of the tree and stuff it into the nearest crevice of the bark. And when I afterwards noticed it the tree trunk in the vicinity of the nest was fringed with these fragments wedged into every crevice of the bark that would hold a tuft of it, the birds ceased their occupation as soon as they observed my approach and stood perfectly quiet and motionless, they were near together with their heads towards the ground, their beaks pointed at right angles with their bodies, they presented an exceedingly odd figure.



Removing the squirrel's nest was quite a job for the birds and not till the tenth of May was their set completed the only one of nine that I have found. The nest was composed of quite a large quantity of material, including fine grass and bark with fur of hares and cattle and a few feathers. There seems a decided uniformity in size shape and markings in

the eggs of the set before me for description, a general ovidal shape — pure white ground color and very light reddish spots, profuse at the large end and thinly scattered over the remaining surface. The fresh eggs have a very delicate rosy tint before being blown. I find the dimensions about 0.75 by, 0.55 inch., only one of the sets seems to vary from that to, 0.73 by, 0.53 inches, in this latter the markings also differ from the others, consisting in this of minute dots, exclusively with no dashes or large marks. In only one of the eggs is the color more decidedly darker than the others. This set is a fair representative of all that I have found except, that in one a darker shade of red prevailed and in another the markings were evenly distributed over the whole surface of the eggs.

The note of the Nuthatch is a single syllable which sounds to me like «Onk» occasionally repeated — as if to tell each other «all right» sometimes the repetition is quite frequent and loud if the pair get separated. Mr. Samuels pronounces their note «cha-cha» but I am not able to distinguish it thus.

Another note I hear from them in early Spring about nesting time is a rapidly repeated «Wa-wa-wa-wa-wa» in a mournful tone, but I never hear it at any other season. My observations have led me to the conclusion that the nesting site selected was not their own excavation but was usually in green wood regardless of the height from the ground, In two of the nests I have seen, the nest proper, though nearly a foot from the entrance was not at all below it, another was about eight inches below. The birds evidently occupy the same nesting place for a series of years if undisturbed.

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Autor(en)/Author(s): Clark John N.

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