

Montana Outdoors PORTRAIT

Red-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta canadensis*)

By Tom Dickson

This small nuthatch (just 4 ½ inches long), blue-gray above and red-brown below, lives year-round in much of Montana and is commonly seen at bird feeders. The name nuthatch derives from the term “nut hack,” referring to the bird’s habit of wedging nuts and hard seeds into a bark crevice and then hacking them open with its sharp bill. It’s also called the topsy-turvy bird and upside-down bird for its habit of scampering headfirst down tree branches.

Appearance: The red-breasted nuthatch is a hyperactive bird that spends most of its time upside down, scrambling along tree branches like a beaked mouse.

Because of the distinct black line extending back from its eye, the red-breasted nuthatch looks a bit like a mountain chickadee. But the nuthatch lacks the chickadee’s black throat, its tail is stubbier, its bill is longer and turns up slightly, and it has a rust-colored breast, like the American robin’s, rather than the light gray one on the chickadee.

This nuthatch also resembles its larger cousin, the white-breasted nuthatch. But the white-breasted has no eye stripe and has a head that is pure white but for a small black cap. Montana’s other nuthatch, the pygmy, resembles the red-breasted but is smaller and has a brown head cap and a white breast.

Sound: These highly sociable birds are constantly chattering among themselves, making a high-pitched, nasal sound described as “yank yank,” “kng kng,” or “nyack nyack.”

Food: Red-breasted nuthatches thrive on nuts and seeds, especially those of spruce and fir. They also eat insect adults, larvae, and eggs, as well as spiders and their eggs. They are drawn to feeders containing chopped nuts, seeds, and suet.

Behavior: Nuthatches scamper along tree branches, often moving downward to find insects and seeds that up-climbing foraging birds such as woodpeckers might miss. A large hind toe provides the red-breasted nuthatch with secure footing as it creeps along the tree bark, and its stubby tail allows the bird to maneuver more easily than a longer one would.

Reproduction: The male and female dig out a nest cavity in a decayed tree or stump, or they will use existing holes and sometimes bird boxes. They line the cavity, which is usually about 8 inches deep, with hair, grasses, dry moss, and shredded bark.

Oddly, the birds also smear the cavity entrance with spruce or pine resin that they bring in their bills. No one is exactly sure why they do it, but the sticky goo could help deter predators such as pine martens or keep other cavity-nesting birds such as house wrens from entering the hole.

The female red-breasted nuthatch lays four to seven eggs, which incubate in 12 days. It takes two to three weeks for the young to fledge, and then they stay with their parents for another several weeks. Throughout this time the parents feed insects to their young.

Habitat: These birds live mainly in coniferous forests, especially those containing tall firs, though they are also found in woodlands along rivers.

Status in Montana: According to John Carlson, zoologist with the Montana Natural Heritage Program, this adaptable species is doing well throughout its range, but because red-breasted nuthatches nest in tree cavities, they could become vulnerable in areas where standing dead and decaying trees are removed.

Though this nuthatch is considered a year-round resident in Montana, it will often head as far south as the Gulf Coast from its northern breeding range when food is in short supply.

“This behavior is unique among North American nuthatches,” Carlson says. He also notes that the red-breasted is the only North American nuthatch to occasionally wander over to Europe. ■



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