

Pygmy nuthatch

Sitta pygmaea

By Julie Lue



Beetles attacked the aspen tree outside our window, drilling into its heart and leaving piles of debris, like crumbles of shredded-wheat cereal, around its base. After the tree died, my husband and I meant to cut it down. But procrastination and a dull saw left it standing until the next spring, when a family of pygmy nuthatches spent several weeks excavating a nest cavity in the rotten trunk.

Three years later, my family and I still often wake on spring and summer mornings to what sounds like a dozen squeaky toys being compressed at once. Excited twittering greets adult nuthatches as they begin delivering breakfast to their young in the old aspen, which they have weatherproofed by jamming dog fur in the cracks. Each adult stuffs a weevil down a tiny gullet, then flits off to nearby ponderosas in search of more food.

APPEARANCE

The pygmy nuthatch is a small, rounded bird about 4 inches long, with plush feathers in subtle colors. It has a bluish-gray back; grayish-brown cap; cream to buff or grayish throat and breast; and a sharp, straight bill that is mostly black in adults but partly yellow in juveniles. The smallest of Montana's three nuthatch species, the pygmy lacks the black hood of the white-breasted nuthatch and the vivid eye stripe and orange-washed breast of the red-breasted nuthatch.

Julie Lue is a writer in Florence.

SOUND

Pygmy nuthatches most commonly communicate with a high, staccato piping, aptly described by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's allaboutbirds.org site as "rubber-ducky calls."

HABITAT

In Montana, pygmy nuthatches live in ponderosa pine forests in western and southern parts of the state. They can also be found from southern British Columbia to central Mexico in other areas of long-needled pines. For nesting, they need mature trees, usually pines, either dead or with dead sections they can hollow out. They will use nest boxes when suitable trees aren't available.

FEEDING

Pygmy nuthatches sort through the needles and bark of pine trees in their hunt for weevils, beetles, and spiders. They also eat pine seeds, which they cache by jamming them into bark. Thanks to a strong back toe and claw on each foot, pygmy nuthatches climb straight up or down a tree trunk or even spiral around it. They may be seen foraging right-side up, upside down, or sideways.

BREEDING

Unusual for songbirds, pygmy nuthatches are cooperative nesters. About a third of nests are attended by "helpers," usually uncles or older male siblings of the current brood, that pitch in to excavate the nest cavity, deliver food to the nesting female, and feed chicks.

SCIENTIFIC NAME *Sitta* is Greek for "nuthatch," and *pygmaea* is derived from the Latin word for "small" or "dwarf."

Pygmy nuthatches raise one or two broods a season. The female lays five to nine eggs, which hatch after about two weeks. The chicks leave the nest two to three weeks later, sometimes before they can fly. They climb up and down the nest tree, occasionally stranding themselves on a branch and needing a parental tug on the tail feathers to get unstuck.

WINTER SURVIVAL

Social as always, a pygmy nuthatch family will join other groups after the breeding season to form large flocks. Communal roosting helps them survive cold winters. They crowd into tree cavities in groups of up to 150—sometimes to the point where birds die of suffocation.

CONSERVATION

The bird conservation organization Partners in Flight ranks the pygmy nuthatch as a species of low conservation concern. But because the bird's fate is linked to that of mature ponderosa pine forests, it is considered an indicator species, and in several states (though not Montana), a species of "special concern." In areas where trees are logged, retaining adequate numbers of standing dead or dying trees ("snags") is key to maintaining healthy pygmy nuthatch populations. 🐿️