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White-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta carolinensis*

The White-breasted Nuthatch, largest of its family in the United States, is frequently spotted moving head first down a tree trunk in search of insects and larvae.

The species occurs throughout most of North America, from southern Canada to central Texas and at higher elevations in Mexico. In Florida the bird has declined in abundance and breeding range and today is found mainly in the northeastern Panhandle.

Habitat. Howell (1932) identified open, mature pine woods as the preferred habitat for this species in Florida. White-breasted Nuthatches use urban parks and residential areas in Louisiana (Bent 1948), and there are recent breeding records from Tallahassee (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). The concentrations of records in the Red Hills physiographic region of northern Florida could be related to the existence of stands of mature pines in the large quail hunting plantations. A widespread shift to intensive silviculture (dense plantings and short rotations), forest fragmentation through urbanization, and reduced use of prescribed fire have possibly contributed to the decline of the White-breasted Nuthatch in Florida. Although nuthatches are common in deciduous forests in the Northeast, Weston's (1965) observation that the White-breasted Nuthatch "seems to be confined to river swamps" is anomalous for Florida. A study in the western United States suggests that the presence of some oaks seems to be a requirement (Garrett and Dunn 1981 in Pravosudov and Grubb 1993). Habitat affinities and breeding records of this species deserve attention in Florida.



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The diet of the White-breasted Nuthatch in the fall and winter largely consists of mast, especially pine seeds, a insects and spiders during the spring and summer (Bent 1948, Howell 1932).

White-breasted Nuthatches make their nests in old cavities excavated by other species or in natural crevices in large snags and living trees. Observations of nuthatch nests in *Red-cockaded Woodpecker* cavities (S. Grimes in Bent 1948, Baker 1971) may indicate that the White-breasted Nuthatch, like the woodpecker, has declined with the loss of mature pine woods in Florida. Rarely they use nest boxes or excavate their own cavities (Bent 1948). The bottom of the cavity is lined with shreds of bark, hair, and feathers. In Florida, the average clutch is 5 eggs (Bent 1948), which are white with light brown and lavender spots (Harrison 1975). Incubation lasts 12 days. Little is known about the nestling period, but a Minnesota study indicated the young took 26 days after hatching to leave the nest (Ritchison 1981).

Seasonal Occurrence. White-breasted Nuthatches are resident in Florida, but Stevenson and Anderson (1994) surmised that migration data "suggest slight and probably irregular migratory movements, but no regular or large migration."

Florida egg dates are 15 March to 11 June, for 8 sets (Bent 1948), and from 2 March to 20 April, for 13 sets (Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

Status. Perhaps because it is common in the northeastern United States, the White-breasted Nuthatch has received relatively little attention in Florida. It was designated a Species of Special Concern by the Florida Committee on Rare and Endangered Plants and Animals (Stevenson 1978c), because it disappeared as a breeding bird from central Florida. (See Stevenson and Anderson 1994 for the historical records.) Breeding Bird Atlas results support the observation that the range of the White-breasted Nuthatch has receded from peninsular Florida. Current breeding records are mostly concentrated in the Red Hills physiographic region of the northeastern Panhandle, with "possible" and "probable" records farther west. The record from Escambia County most likely refers to wandering birds, not local breeders. The White-breasted Nuthatch's distinctive appearance and voice make it unlikely that this species could have been missed during intensive field surveys, but many areas in its range were surveyed only briefly.

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White-breasted Nuthatch

