

White-breasted Nuthatch

Sitta carolinensis

White-breasted Nuthatches inhabit mature deciduous or largely deciduous woodlands. The species nests in the cavities of trees containing hollows, dead limbs, or snags. The presence of trees such as beech or oaks that produce large amounts of mast may be important in determining the abundance of these nuthatches, as the species is scarce where such trees are scarce. White-breasted Nuthatches are readily attracted to bird-feeders, and may often be found in urban and suburban locales when suitable nest sites are available.

White-breasted Nuthatches are present year-round in Vermont. The species is readily discovered by its vocalizations. Its song is first heard during January and continues to be heard until about mid May, with a short intermission in late March (Kilham 1972a). The song is a staccato series of nasal notes, not unlike the song of the Northern Flicker, but more rounded in tone. Most singing occurs in the early morning just after the male has left his roost hole (Kilham 1972a). Nuthatches also have a variety of nasal calls that are easily identified. During the Atlas Project the most frequent confirmations were of adults with food for young (38% of all confirmations) and recently fledged young (37% of all confirmations).

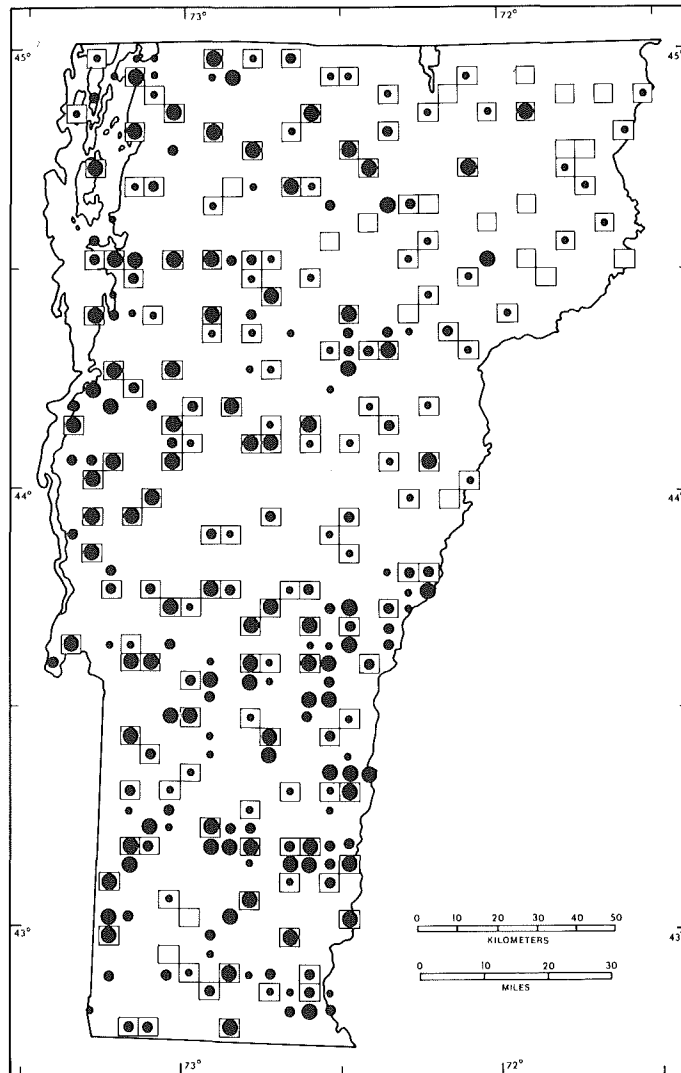
White-breasted Nuthatches maintain a 15 ha (37 a) territory throughout the year (Kilham 1981). Loosely speaking, the adults mate for life; the pair bond is renewed in late winter each year. Nest-building activity is most evident in April. The nest is located in a natural cavity, often a rotted-out knot-hole or a hole excavated by a woodpecker. Nuthatches seem to prefer holes at least twice as wide as their bodies (Kilham 1971b). A peculiar behavior associated with nest building is bill-sweeping, in which both members of the pair, with various items in their bills, vigorously sweep about the nest hole and on the nest tree. This activity may discourage squirrels from investigating the



nest (Kilham 1968). Nests are 1.5–15.2 m (5–50 ft) above the ground (Bull 1974).

The eggs are white, with pale red-brown or purplish spots concentrated about the large end. Clutch size ranges from 4 to 10 eggs; 29 clutches cited in Bent (1948) and Bull (1974) averaged 6.8 eggs. Dates for five Vermont clutches range from April 28 to June 20. The incubation period has been reported as 12 days (Allen 1929). There are only three reports of nestlings for Vermont, one from June 7 to 12, another for June 18, and a third for June 25. Stokes (1983) placed the nestling period at about 14 days. Dependent young have been recorded on 13 dates in Vermont, from June 15 to August 2.

The White-breasted Nuthatch is widely but thinly distributed over most of Vermont, with the smallest numbers in the Northeast Highlands and the North Central regions. Since adults are largely sedentary, Christmas Bird Count data should provide a reasonable index to the population in various parts of Vermont. Numbers recorded per party hour for the years 1974–82 indicate a total figure of 0.58 birds per party hour. The two highest counts were at Saxtons River (1.02 birds per party hour) and Ferrisburg (0.91); the two lowest counts were at Island Pond (0.12) and Craftsbury-Greensboro (0.34). The higher counts were in the southern Connecticut River valley and the Cham-



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 160 (89%)

Possible breeding: 61 (38% of total)

Probable breeding: 36 (23% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 63 (39% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	30	97	19
Green Mountains	52	96	33
North Central	13	68	8
Northeast Highlands	7	44	4
East Central	18	95	11
Taonic Mountains	16	100	10
Eastern Foothills	24	100	15

plain Lowlands, while the lower counts were in the northeast. These demographic patterns hold true in Atlas Project records for occurrence of the species in priority blocks, as well as for its confirmation in priority blocks. Possibly the greater amount of oak, hickory, and beech in western and southern Vermont is conducive to a larger population.

WALTER G. ELLISON