

1 Red-breasted Nuthatch

A bird that has been a resident on Great Spruce Head Island for as long as I can remember - never abundant but always present in small numbers - is the Red-breasted Nuthatch. The name is misleading ; how misleading I did not discover until recently I had the opportunity to photograph and observe the bird closely. The most that can be said is that the underparts of the male, <sup>though</sup> more <sup>and in</sup> than <sup>noticeable</sup> the female, are washed with pale buff. The color is distributed non-uniformly from the throat to the under-tailcoverts with especially <sup>noticeable</sup> emphasis on the bird's flanks. ~~Of course~~ <sup>this</sup> description is based on the close observation of only one pair of birds, <sup>species</sup> but if the ~~can~~ <sup>can</sup> legitimately be considered red breasted the designation distinguishing it must be accepted as weakly ~~distinctive~~ from its larger white breasted relative. There are other more characteristic field marks than this: the white stripe over the eye for one, ~~and~~ small size, and the usual squeaky nasal calls higher-pitched than the yank yank of the white-breasted nuthatch.

<sup>For many years and for many hours</sup> I spent many hours ~~for years~~ in the spring and summer <sup>I hunted</sup> ~~hunting~~ <sup>(of past years) in vain</sup> for the nest of a Red-breasted Nuthatch. <sup>a pair of</sup> I would find ~~the~~ birds time and again feeding together, chattering and anking back and forth in their habitual affectionate behavior towards one another, but never was I able to track them to a nest. They always eluded my pursuit by disappearing into the spruce forest or suddenly flying away over the tree tops. Not until 1969 did I succeed at last and then only by the fortunate concurrence of <sup>in late May</sup> circumstances. I started looking ~~early~~ that year/before they could possibly have started to nest. Several pairs had already arrived on the Island and could be observed as they jerked along the branches of the larger trees ~~white birches~~ feeding ~~and courting~~ and carrying on a steady flow of <sup>in particular</sup> nuthatch conversation. One pair/I watched for many minutes on ~~several~~ <sup>different</sup> occasions working over a large white birch for dormant and newly ~~emerged~~ <sup>metamorphosed</sup> insect life. The tree seemed to have an especial attraction for them

because they returned to it again and again over the course of several  
 until  
 days, ~~and~~ I began to wonder whether their interest centered primarily on  
 the insect life the tree provided or was conveniently near their nest site.  
 I ruled out the birch itself as a nest site since it was seemingly healthy  
 and free of dead wood. The male bird was very busy ingratiating himself <sup>with</sup>  
~~to~~ his female companion <sup>the</sup> whom he returned ~~to~~ at frequent intervals with  
 particularly succulent morsels which he placed in her open bill. She would  
 cease her own foraging as he approached and with quivering wings and upraised  
 head assume the juvenile begging posture. All the time this went on they both  
 were making conversational chitty sounds. The attentiveness of the male  
 is so unremitting that it is touching to observe. He seems to <sup>be trying to do</sup> ~~try by doing~~  
 everything within his powers to please her, feeding being only one aspect  
 of his solicitude. One day I came upon both birds exploring the cavities  
 made by woodpeckers in the still standing, branchless and decaying trunk  
 of a balsam fir. They crept around the trunk poking into the holes of  
 which there were five to six excavated only an inch or two into the trunk. In  
 one, however, ~~was~~ deep enough to conceal a nuthatch the male spent a long  
 time digging <sup>wood</sup> out. He would disappear inside for a few seconds, reappear  
 with a large chip in his bill which he dropped outside, and then go back for  
 more. Eventually his mate came to inspect the work, peered in, bobbed her  
 head inside a few times and flew off. The site was apparently not to her  
 liking for I never saw either of them there again.

A few days later in the same general locality, for which reason I  
 assumed they were the same pair, I found <sup>the</sup> two nuthatches working on a  
 dead birch stub about twenty feet tall that had broken off at the base  
 and had fallen against a spruce tree growing a few feet away. Most of the  
 bark had peeled off the stub and near its top were <sup>shallow</sup> several downy woodpecker  
 holes. In two of these separated vertically by ~~but~~ <sup>a</sup> little more than a foot  
 the nuthatches were busily at work digging out wood from the interior.  
 As each bird chipped away inside only the tip of its tail was visible.

Every few seconds it would back out to drop the chips ~~outside~~. The male bird worked intermittently on the upper hole and the female worked alternately on both but concentrated most of her efforts on the lower one.

her mate, <sup>who</sup> ~~he~~ flew off from time to time to resume his foraging and would always return with food which he would give her before his excavating.

mate. Both holes seemed to be equally deep and it was impossible to predict which one-if either-would become the nest cavity. No pitch was smeared around the edges of either hole, but this practice typical of red-breasted nuthatches may not begin until excavation is completed or possibly egg laying has begun. This habit of working on unfinished

woodpecker <sup>diggings</sup> holes that I have <sup>gobs</sup> seen carried on throughout the month of June, I have observed with <sup>and it</sup> <sup>abortive</sup>

by other pairs of nuthatches/seems to be an activity related to pair formation and courtship behavior rather than <sup>XXs</sup> ~~XXXXXX~~ to the start/beginning of nest ~~XXXX~~ construction. When I did ultimately find a nest the entrance diameter was much smaller than any of these woodpecker holes, strongly/ the from start to finish /entire excavation/had ~~XXXXXX~~ been made by the nuthatches, and was not an adaptation to a pre-existing cavity.

As seems to be the way <sup>these things</sup> ~~it~~ usually happens, bird's nest discoveries occur when one is least expecting <sup>them</sup> it. Often when I am concentrating on finding the nest of a particular kind of bird I <sup>to find</sup> ~~turn up~~ with something quite different that I did not even have in the back of my mind at the time.

That one does unexpectedly find <sup>these things</sup> ~~these~~ nests reflects on one's state of alertness <sup>which does not permit the dismissal of an</sup> ~~when no~~ activity in the bird world <sup>can be dismissed without input</sup> ~~can be dismissed without input~~ ~~XXXXXX~~ taking the chance of <sup>missing an important thing to observe and</sup> ~~having a significant event pass unnoticed~~ <sup>and thus making a significant</sup> ~~or an important~~ discovery missed. Such was the situation when I found the nuthatch nest. On July 3rd I was hunting/through the new growth of evergreen forest seedlings and young birches which were filling the/vacuum created by a

blowdown several years before. Most of the fallen trees had been cleared for fire wood away/right after the storm that leveled them, but the survivors of the blow

still stood in scattered clusters or as solitary mementos of the forest that had disappeared. Tall, slim, and branchless below the high evergreen crown they held to a precarious footing, having lost in a powerful gust of winter wind, long ago, the collective support afforded by their neighbors. They had, however, acquired a new importance in the scheme of things by providing an ideal habitat for the olive-sided flycatcher, a bird that prefers the lofty perches left behind by the wreckage of a coniferous forest, and that builds its nest in the top foliage of these stark sentinels. announcing their presence with their triple nesting call, pep-pep-pep- The flycatchers were on this day in July as they had been doing since early spring and every year since the blow-down occurred. I found their nest several years ago and photographed the birds, but it wasn't easy.

topless A few gaunt remains of trees also stood in this natural clearing: forty or more feet tall, whose scaling bark still clung dead, broken trunks whose tops had fallen, leaving thirty feet of shaggy bark clinging, between the stubs of branches, to fungus softened wood the favored nesting sites for brown creepers. I was standing waist deep

in a tangle of young balsam firs and raspberry vines near one of these skeletons when a small bird flew straight and purposefully to it alighting near the top. <sup>My first thought was of</sup> I wondered about a brown creeper, but <sup>the action was with distinctive of the bird</sup> they generally <sup>creep</sup> <sup>which</sup> their way up a trunk from below and fly off from the top. I didn't see where the bird went <sup>from higher up</sup> until it suddenly flew away. On examining the tree foot by foot with my binoculars I found no sign of a creeper's nest. Then the bird returned and I was able to keep it in view. It was a red-breasted nuthatch, and it worked its way down the tree on my side until it reached a black spot, which I had mistaken for a knot, and there above this hole it paused, the <sup>stayed</sup> head of a small gray bird appeared and received <sup>the</sup> a morsel of food from the bill of the bird above. <sup>it had been carrying</sup> in its bill. The bird that brought the food was clearly a male, and the one inside I mistook for a juvenile. For some time I watched this feeding process wondering where the female was, and thinking that the young were

<sup>for</sup> so advanced that it would be hopeless to try to photograph at this nest <sup>because</sup> ~~for~~ the disturbance of building a scaffolding for the camers would surely cause them all to leave. But then after one of the visits by the male, the bird inside came out, looked around, and without hesitation flew away. This was no juvenile, but an adult bird, in fact <sup>it was</sup> the female whose whereabouts had puzzled me. Now I realized that the breeding cycle was not as far advanced as I had feared and that the nest contained either eggs or very small young.

The entrance hole was much smaller than I had expected judging by the woodpecker diggings ~~XXX~~ with which the nuthatches had been so engrossed in June. But, <sup>subject</sup> of course, <sup>the</sup> a red-breasted nuthatch is much smaller than a downy woodpecker and would not require nearly so large an opening.

The bark around the hole, I now saw was smeared with globules of shiny pitch to which bits of ~~nesting material~~ <sup>by gran</sup> straws and lichens had become stuck, in all probability some of the nesting material the birds had brought to use for the lining of the cavity.

Another rather surprising feature was the nearly rectangular shape of the opening, <sup>instead of being</sup> ~~not~~ almost exactly circular as are woodpecker holes.

The sight of the pitch excited me as does the first personal confirmations of well authenticated, but up to then never experienced, phenomena, such as the first telescopic view of the rings of Saturn, the green flash at sunset, ~~an exploding meteor~~, or witnessing the emergence of a moth from its cocoon. <sup>experiences arouse</sup> These first/ a sense of justification for the <sup>doubt</sup> awe and <sup>that</sup> the incomprehensible events in nature cause one to feel. Wonder that what others have <sup>described</sup> said is indeed so, and skepticism about the <sup>accepted</sup> interpretations of these observations.

After a short while the female returned without food and entered the nest where she remained. It now seemed most probable that she was <sup>affecting</sup> incubating eggs, and that the male bird's <sup>faithful</sup> ~~devotions~~ in bringing diligent <sup>faithfulness</sup> of the male bird in providing <sup>her with</sup> a constant supply of food for <sup>her</sup> ~~his~~ mate was a continuation of ~~his~~ his devotion during the courtship

period. His steadfastness was the most affecting characteristic of his behavior.

The height of the nest ~~as later measured was~~ 28 feet. There being no nearby trees, and <sup>because of</sup> the shakyness of the nest tree itself, required that to photograph the birds ~~an independent tower would have to be built~~. This <sup>separate post at the tree</sup> with the help of my son Stephen I did, cutting slender spruce trees for poles and scrounging all the scrap lumber we could find. When completed the camera on its tripod was level with the nest hole and could be set at a distance of three to four feet away. Building the tower seemed to disturb the birds very little, and when completed I sat on the small platform <sup>on top</sup> to test their reaction to my presence ~~as well~~ so close to the nest. In a remarkably short time the male nuthatch was feeding the female as though I simply did not exist. Setting up the camera, and especially the lights, caused an additional short period of adjustment on the part of the birds, but these <sup>two</sup> they quickly accepted, ~~too~~ and from then on ignored. I took all photographs, with the exception of the first ~~two~~ or three, while sitting beside my camera. Once, <sup>to</sup> I tested the reaction of the male when he returned with food <sup>I</sup> by placing my hand over the hole. He tried to poke through between my fingers. During the last of the incubation period and repeatedly after the eggs had hatched I took many pictures, but I never saw the young <sup>birds</sup> because I had to leave Maine before they fledged. <sup>do</sup> They apparently stay in the nest longer than the young of most passerine birds that do not nest in hollow trees.