

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher *Polioptila caerulea*



Folk Name: Chay-chay, Moss Bird

Status: Breeder

Abundance: Common

Habitat: Deciduous forests and woodlands, often near water

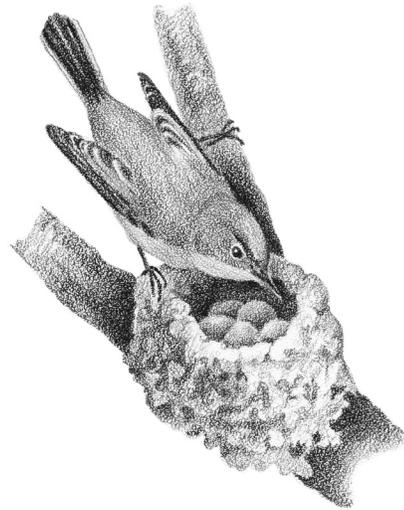
As its name suggests, the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is blue gray above and off-white below. It has a long black tail offset with white outer tail feathers. It has a white eye-ring. The male is more richly colored than the female and has a black forehead and crown line while in breeding plumage. It averages only 4 ½ inches in length. Its call is a characteristic buzzy *zee-ee-e* or *chay*, which is easy to learn.

In 1930, Statesville's Maurice Stimson provided this characterization:

The Gnatcatcher is one of the first birds to nest in the spring. He nests in early April. ... They come to us in early March and may be found around our cemetery [Oakwood] late in February or March. ... He builds his nest fifteen or twenty feet high on branches of trees. He is a gentle and confiding in his manner and builds within easy reach of the eye. His building season is in the early spring when the tree leaves are no larger than a squirrel's ear, for this reason his nest may be clearly observed. He does not mind observation. He is a nervous bird, but not shy and is gentle.



Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. (Jeff Maw)



The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher generally arrives in the Central Carolinas in numbers in late February or early March and spends the breeding season and summer here. They are commonly distributed throughout the region and usually flock with other songbirds after breeding. A one-day regional high count of 159 Blue-gray Gnatcatchers was tallied on the Charlotte Spring Bird Count held in April 2016.

Most gnatcatchers spend their winter along the coast of both Carolinas and southward. Occasionally, some winter in the Carolina Piedmont as well. We have records of this bird in the Central Carolinas during all months of the year. Our earliest record of a bird "that presumably spent the entire winter" here, was a gnatcatcher seen over and over in a backyard in Charlotte throughout the winter of 1982–1983. This species has now been repeatedly found on Christmas Bird Counts and winter field trips conducted in the region. Rising average winter temperatures provide insectivorous birds like the gnatcatcher a better opportunity to survive the season here.

During the late 1800s, R.B. McLaughlin reported an early arrival date of 24 March and an average arrival date for this species of 27 March. He regularly collected nests and eggs of the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher to sell to collectors. He reported collecting 30 nests and egg sets in a single season. Loomis designated the gnatcatcher an abundant bird in Chester during the same period. Elmer Brown sighted one in Salisbury on 28 March in 1922.

Charlotte's William McIlwaine provided reports of the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher in Charlotte in the late 1920s and early 1930s. On April 4, 1928, he observed "the trees down on Sugaw Creek are alive with the charming little

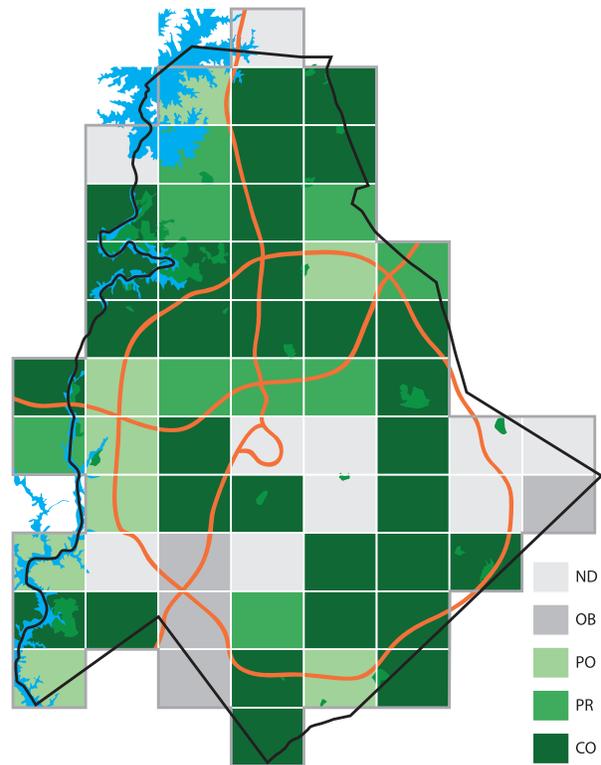
blue-gray gnatcatchers.” On 15 April he remarked: “By the way, the blue-gray gnatcatcher constructs its nest just like that of the humming-bird, only considerably larger. I have seen a pair at the job.” On April 8, 1929, he found: “the blue-gray gnatcatcher in the small trees on the creek bank in considerable numbers. I was interested in seeing one of the birds eating something off the web of the tent caterpillar. I suppose it was caterpillars themselves. Hurray for the blue-gray gnatcatcher!” On April 21, 1930, he wrote: “I was so interested in a nearly completed nest of a blue-gray gnatcatcher. It was in a sycamore tree, about 20 ft. up, of course on the top of a horizontal limb, and close to the trunk of the tree. One of the birds made some sort of deposit while I was watching.”

Jack Dermid, one of North Carolina’s most renowned wildlife photographers often reminisced about learning to photograph birds when he was a boy in Charlotte in the late 1930s. One of his fondest memories was taking photographs of a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher nest near the Catawba River while he was still in high school. He found the nest situated on a tree branch, close to the trunk, about 30 feet up in the air. Dermid climbed the tree and carefully secured his camera. He tied a string to the shutter release button, advanced the film, climbed back down, and waited. After a time, the adult birds came back to the nest. He pulled the string to take the picture. Then he climbed back up the tree, reset his system and repeated this process over and over, until he had taken a full roll of film. Dermid reported that the birds were very patient with him and said falling never crossed his mind—he was just intent on getting one good clear shot from his roll of film.

Blue-gray Gnatcatchers use flakes of lichen to cover the outside of their nests and attach them with spider silk. These nests are extremely well camouflaged and look very much like a lichen-covered knobs on a branch of a tree. Some are placed on branches fairly low to the ground. The nests have been described as being the size of “half-a-hen’s egg” with the interior space “as soft as a mullein leaf.” With patience, these nests can be found and the nesting activities of these birds closely observed. For

several consecutive years in the 1990s, a pair nested on a low branch of an old oak beside Latta Nature Center in Huntersville. It was a highlight of each April for the educators to share the activities of these birds at their nest with park visitors and school children.

A review of nest records on file indicates most are active in April with an average clutch size of three eggs. Young generally fledge by the fourth week of May. Some nests are built in March. Mecklenburg County BBA volunteer Ron Clark photographed an active gnatcatcher nest on the Six Mile Creek Greenway in Charlotte on March 27, 2012, which is quite early.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Widespread (PR/9, CO/31)