

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

Backyard Birders, your observations on bird behavior and feeding habits may be more important than you think! Oftimes, but not always, what you see may be well known and documented and published. When it comes to the every day, garden variety of common birds, there is still much to be learned and perhaps you can make a significant contribution to the literature. Never assume that something interesting is well known just because you have seen it.

A case in point was brought to my attention when reading the Spring issue of *Chat* (Vol. 47, No. 2). In the General Field Notes department there was an article titled "Brown-headed Nuthatches Store Pine Seeds." My first reaction was, "So what else is new?" I had been aware of this behavior for a number of years. As I read on, however, I realized that this article was intended to provide the "first *published* descriptions of food-storing behavior in the Brown-headed Nuthatch."

My yard and those surrounding have several Loblolly Pines and old scraggly Virginia Pines that are visited the year around by both Brown-headed and White-breasted Nuthatches (and in winter by Red-breasted). For a number of years, I had noted that when the pine cones ripen and seeds begin to fall in late October and early November, the number of nuthatches present picks up. Closer observation showed that the birds were removing seeds from the newly opened cones and taking same to cracks and crevices in the bark of the same tree, or a nearby pine. The nuthatches then proceeded to poke the seeds into these cracks, and also into old, empty cones still hanging on the trees. Later on, in winter, these birds along with chickadees, titmice, and Downy Woodpeckers would retrieve the seeds and eat them. When, in winter, there were sunflower seeds to be had, all of the above, except the Downy, would take seeds from the feeder and store them in much the same way as they had done with the pine seeds.

Feeling that such vague memories were not sufficient to publish, I began a watch this fall when the pine cones opened. Sure enough, the little nuthatches were busy as bees. This time, I made a note of time and place. On a fair, mild morning of 7 November 1983, from 0945 until 1000 hours, I watched two Brown-headed Nuthatches busily removing fresh seeds from a Loblolly Pine and flying to an adjacent pine. They then proceeded to poke these seeds into crevices in bark and into old cones.

On 13 November, it was cloudy and cold at 0845 as I noted the Brown-headed Nuthatches again removing new seeds and storing them. Seeds were falling rapidly from the trees that morning, some, no doubt, dislodged by the nuthatches. Again, at 0750 on 17 November, when it was fair and cold, the nuthatches were quite active as they worked. Nearly every seed removed from one tree was stored in another. I puzzled about this need to transport seeds from one tree to another. Perhaps it was a habit developed eons ago by the little birds as means to insure a winter supply of food should one tree be destroyed in some manner. Perhaps the constant movement and flitting from tree to tree was designed to confuse other birds looking for seeds.

To make such observations of tiny nuthatches in tall pines takes time and a good pair of binoculars. Distractions are many, for when the seeds begin to ripen and fall, there are numerous other species of birds feasting on pine seeds: Dark-eyed Juncos, American Goldfinches, Purple and House Finches, Tufted Titmice, and Carolina Chickadees and if, around, Evening Grosbeaks and Pine Siskins.

Have You Ever Noticed?

The field guides point out as an aid to identification of Rufous-sided Towhees and Fox Sparrows the fact that both species scratch on the ground with both feet at the same time. But we have also seen White-throated Sparrows scratch in this same manner. Have you?

It is fairly widely known that on occasion Red-headed Woodpeckers may be seen flying out from a perch (especially a dead tree or power pole) and “hawking” insects. I have not been so fortunate as to observe this behavior, Red-heads being in short supply in these parts. However, I was surprised recently (3 November 1983, late afternoon) to watch a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker fly out from the side of an old Black Cherry tree and catch some small insects in the air. He repeated this several times.

Vireo Vignettes

When I first became interested in bird watching, I despaired of ever seeing—really seeing—a Red-eyed Vireo. I learned the rising and falling song and saw the underparts of birds swinging high in the hardwoods many, many times before, after several years of frustration, a courting pair finally let me see the red eyes and other field marks well enough so I could add the species to my life list.

The summer our home was under construction (1966), I discovered nests of both the Red-eyed and the Yellow-throated Vireo in our wooded yard that lies in the dogleg of a fairway at the Zebulon Country Club and slopes down to a spring. The latter species nested again the following summer, but has been seen only as a transient since then. Apparently fragmentation of the woodlands made the site unsuitable for nesting. One or two pairs of Red-eyes have continued to breed here annually. I have watched them courting, building nests, incubating eggs, and tending young—young cowbirds as well as their own offspring. You might say I'm on intimate terms with this once elusive species.

Solitary Vireos, like the White-eyed and—on one occasion—the Bell's, occur in the yard as transients. On 20 May 1983 I discovered a Summer Tanager nest in the yard and watched it every moment I could spare until the young fledged. While doing so, I could hear the frontyard Red-eyed Vireo singing to my left and the backyard male singing to my right.

Occasionally these birds gave their catlike call note, and from time to time they sounded just like Solitary Vireos. I assumed that the cool morning temperatures were causing the uncommonly slow songs. Sometimes the neighborhood Carolina Chickadees, Red-eyed Vireos, and Brown Thrashers joined the tanagers in scolding me while I examined the contents of the nest. By 9 June the tanagers had active young in their nest. If the female was reluctant to return to the nest and feed the offspring, her mate would chase her toward the nest. During one of these chases, he was assisted by a Solitary Vireo.

After that incident, I paid close attention to the vireo songs, and soon became convinced that I had a pair of Solitary Vireos on territory. I watched as one and then the other of the pair sang. At times the two birds scolded me while I sat watching the tanager nest. "Shu-shu-shu-shu," they said, sounding much like a scolding Gray Squirrel.

In the late afternoon of 11 June, I found the Solitary Vireos building a nest in a drooping fork about 20 feet above ground in a spindly young Red Oak near the spring. Both members of the pair were bringing fluffy white material, apparently bits of oak galls. Having read that Solitary Vireos will abandon a nest if it is watched too closely while under construction, I left immediately, with one of the pair following me back to the tanagers' nest, scolding all the way.

The next morning I could see no progress in the nest construction, though both Solitary Vireos were still on territory and upset about the attention I was paying to the fledgling Summer Tanagers. On 13 June I heard a Solitary Vireo singing. It flew to the nest; poked its bill into the structure at several places, singing all the while; and flew away, still singing. I suspect this performance was intended to decoy me away from the new nesting site.

Although I never found a second nest, a pair of Solitary Vireos remained in the neighborhood all summer. I frequently heard them across the first leg of the fairway at the edge of a small pond that is fed by my spring, but sometimes they were across the other leg of the fairway along my route to the mail box. The area covered was quite large, approximately 25 acres. On 23 June a pair exhibited territorial behavior in the wooded lot beside my mail box, and I assume this is where they nested. I heard singing, scolding, and the sharp, descending "vee-u" note almost daily through 24 July and occasionally in August. On 9 September I began hearing the birds regularly on my morning walks. On 11 September one was singing and at least two more were scolding simultaneously beside the pond across the fairway. On 12 September I watched two Solitaries as they did imitations of White-eyed Vireos. They rushed the "chick-per-o-wee" and omitted the customary concluding "chick," but they might have fooled me if I had not seen them. At the pond I found two more Solitaries. One sang the regular song while the other scolded and did White-eyed imitations. I can find no mention of Solitary Vireos performing White-eyed Vireo vocalizations in the general literature.

A cold front passed the evening of 12 September, and I have not heard Solitary Vireos since then. I assume they have gone south for the winter. Although the species has long been known to breed in Wake County, the apparent nesting near Zebulon extends the range slightly to the east. I hope the Solitary Vireos will return next spring and let me become better acquainted with them.—ELOISE F. POTTER, Route 3, Box 114 AA, Zebulon, N.C. 27597