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Brown-headed Nuthatch *Sitta pusilla*

The Brown-headed Nuthatch is a tiny inhabitant of southeastern pinelands, occurring from southeastern Oklahoma east to Maryland and Delaware and south to the northern Bahamas. Two subspecies breed in Florida: *S. p. pusilla* in the Panhandle and *S. p. caniceps*, the Gray-headed Nuthatch (Howell 1932) in the peninsula (Stevenson 1976).

Habitat. Like the Red-cockaded Woodpecker, the Brown-headed Nuthatch is so restricted to Florida's pine flatwoods "that it is useless to look for it elsewhere" (Sprunt 1954).

Their diet consists chiefly of small insects and spiders gleaned from the trunks and branches of pines (Nesbitt and Hetrick 1976). Pine seeds and mast are also eaten (Howell 1932). The Brown-headed Nuthatch is the only bird in North America to regularly use a tool to obtain its food. As reported by Morse (1968), Brown-headed Nuthatches in one pine forest in Louisiana used a flake of pine bark to remove other flakes on the tree and uncover insects hiding underneath. This behavior has also been observed in Florida in Pasco and Highlands counties and in other states (Pranty 1995a).

The Brown-headed Nuthatch nests in cavities that it excavates in pine snags, dead stubs, and fenceposts, often within a few feet of the ground. It is one of the earliest-breeding land birds in Florida, beginning nesting activities in mid-February and continuing until May (Bent 1948). The 4 to 6 white eggs, heavily spotted with reddish-brown, are incubated for 14 days. Nestlings fledge at 18 or 19 days of age (Ehrlich et al. 1988). Two broods may be raised in a year (Bent 1948).

Seasonal Occurrence. Most egg-laying occurs in March and April; cavity excavation often is observed in February.

Status. In Florida the Brown-headed Nuthatch is found in small flocks or family groups. It is common in the Panhandle, but its abundance decreases as one moves down the peninsula. It occurs south to northern Monroe County.

Because of its small size, dull coloration, and restricted habitat, the Brown-headed Nuthatch is a low profile bird, overlooked by many of Florida's birdwatchers and, undoubtedly, many atlasers also. The easiest means of locating a flock of Brown-headed Nuthatches is to listen for them. The birds have a distinctive, high-pitched chittering that strongly resembles the sound of a rubber squeeze toy. Like most small landbirds, the Brown-headed Nuthatch is highly responsive to an Eastern Screech-Owl's call, and the use of an owl tape certainly resulted in many Atlas records that would have been missed otherwise.

Bill Pranty

Sponsored by Vera and Bruce Nylan

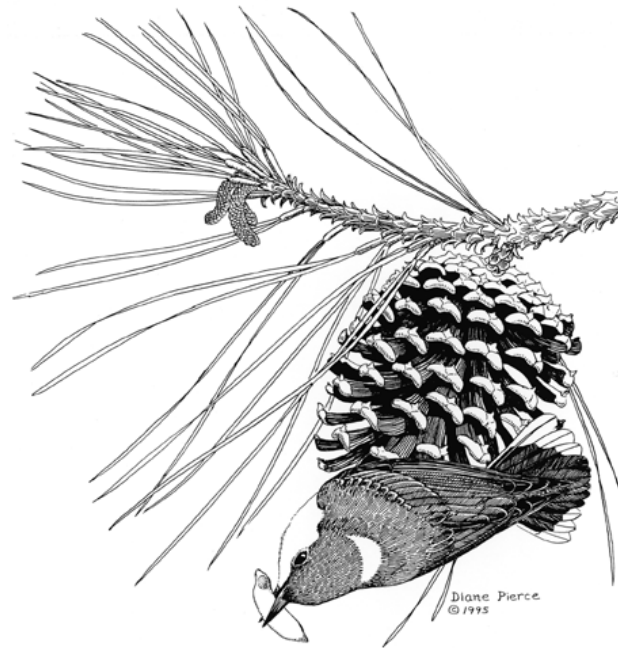


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Brown-headed Nuthatch

