

# OBSERVATIONS OF WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH

JEAN BANCROFT, 306-200 Tuxedo Boulevard, Winnipeg, Manitoba. R3P 0R3

Throughout the year in Winnipeg, as well as in various other areas in southern Manitoba, the quaint loud "yank yank" calls of the White-breasted Nuthatch can be heard. This bird's name is thought to be a corruption of "nuthack."<sup>3</sup> It habitually wedges seeds or nuts into crannies of tree bark. It then proceeds "to hack the exposed surface until it cracks the shell and then picks out the contents." It frequents feeding stations where it obtains sunflower seeds, and can be seen storing the food in the bark of a tree for a "rainy day." As it goes up and down a tree head-first its long, sharp claws give it sure footing on vertical bark surfaces from which it digs out many kinds of insects, insect eggs and pupae. In early spring it has also been seen imbibing at sapsucker sap-wells.<sup>4</sup>

The White-breasted Nuthatch is a cavity nesting bird. According to Stokes, "throughout the year each bird spends the night in a separate roost hole. Sometimes a female takes over a male roost hole in late winter and early spring, and that particular hole may become the nest hole for the breeding season."<sup>7</sup>

On 10 May 1986 I noticed a pair of White-breasted Nuthatches come out of a small cavity in a rotted knothole 5.4 m from the ground in an old elm. The tree was situated on a boulevard which ran parallel to the Assiniboine River and near to an entrance gate to Assiniboine Park in Winnipeg.

This site was visited again 18 May to see if there was any activity around the hole. An adult entered the cavity and came out; it then flew across the road to a giant

Chestnut tree. Three days later an adult flew to the hole but did not enter as a plane came overhead and appeared to disturb it. (As male and female are similar it is difficult to distinguish the sexes.) A few minutes later both male and female flew to a branch close to the hole at which time the male gave the female an insect. Stokes states "mate-feeding takes place during courtship and it increases in frequency as nest-building and egg-laying approach, but 'once the young hatch it soon stops.'"<sup>7</sup>

At 1100 h 31 May the two birds took turns entering the cavity. Between entries they busied themselves moving up and down the nearby trees in constant search for food. During the next few days the nest was observed at different times each day and both adults entered the hole — on a few occasions with a cankerworm in their beaks. On 10 June at 1030 h an adult flew near the cavity, perched above it, appeared to dissect a worm, then went into the hole. This time it came out backwards which was unusual.

The nest site was observed every other day to discover when the young would leave. When both parents came with food on 11 June they did not go completely into the hole as previously; this indicated that the young ones were maturing. On 13 June an adult head protruded from the hole but the bird was deterred from coming out by the loud warning calls of a Red-winged Blackbird. The male came with a worm in its beak and gave it to the female at the opening, whereupon the female drew back into the hole.

When an adult flew to the hole 14 June

it could be seen that the young were near the opening. Two days later the adults did not enter the cavity but fed the young at the entrance; some would soon be fledging. (The nestling phase is recorded as 14 days.<sup>7</sup>) Near 1000 h 17 June an adult put only its head and neck into the hole on three trips to feed the young and once a fecal sac was taken out.

Until 16 June both adults flew across the road to obtain insects from large trees there. On 17 June one of the adults flew to a tree 15 m directly behind the nest site. It appeared that some of the young had fledged and were being fed there, but they could not be located. (The fledgling phase may last for about 2 weeks.<sup>7</sup>) Both parents made continuous trips to the nest hole between 1050 and 1100 h on 18 June. At least two young were at the opening. No nuthatches were seen or heard at the site on 19 or 20 June.

Although the entire nesting period was observed in this cavity, the nest site had not been located in time to observe nest-building. This activity was observed at another site in April 1982. The unusual activity commenced outside a larger knothole (with a passageway) 3.6 m up in a giant elm. This cavity opening was larger than that of the 1986 nest and with a crooked entrance. The pair of White-breasted Nuthatches was gathering bits of dried leaves from crevices in tree bark and carrying them into the nest hole. Several times in the following 8 days these adults exhibited the strange behaviour called "bill-sweeping" in which both adults engage in prolonged sweeping of the bill in a wide arc in or outside the cavity.<sup>7</sup> When bill-sweeping the birds seemed occasionally to have an insect in their beak, and then they wiped their bills on the bark; they also proceeded to stuff something into the crevices of the bark around the hole. Although the reason for this behaviour is not known it is believed that these activities "leave a scent that deters squirrels and other mammal

predators from the nest area;" this is a territorial defense mechanism.<sup>7 6</sup>

On 24 April a crow appeared, causing some commotion; it perched on many occasions atop a giant spruce adjacent to the elm containing the cavity. The activity of the nuthatches ceased; presumably they deserted this nest site.

A most fascinating nest was discovered in 1976 in a large cavity 0.6 m from the ground in a deformity of an old giant oak tree in the yard at Whytewold (south end of Lake Winnipeg). On several occasions prior to 21 May a pair of nuthatches had been observed going up and down the bark of this tree. The gnarled cavity (approximately 7.5 cm by 15 cm on the outside) was concealed by slender branches of a dogwood. When the adults began carrying food more frequently I investigated, finding that the only way to see into the cavity was to pull aside a branch of the dogwood at 1630 h each day when a shaft of sunlight penetrated the cavity. On 4 June several fluffy young were visible.

On 8 June a chipmunk was running about on the ground at the base of the nest tree. Both adults, while coming down the tree head first, performed the display known as "wing-spread."<sup>7</sup> They gave this display on the ground as well; this lasted for several minutes while the chipmunk was still in sight on the ground. In wing-spread on a tree trunk the body and the bill are pointed vertically and the wings and tail are fully spread. The bird will either sway slowly back and forth and/or pose in this position; the latter was the case in this display. It is evidently to ward off squirrels and other birds which may compete for the nest holes chosen by nuthatches. Over the next several days food carrying activity increased. On 17 June five nearly fledged young were sitting upright, close together in such a manner as to resemble miniature penguins. This nest afforded an unusual opportunity for observation since "as is



the case of most nestling birds reared in a hole in a tree, little is known of the young . . . . while they are in the nest."<sup>2</sup> By 1000 h the following day several young had fledged after much calling. At 1630 the cavity was empty except for one tiny, dead, naked chick.

Since the White-breasted Nuthatch does not leave our area in winter it is delightful to hear its calls and watch its behaviour throughout the entire year.

- <sup>1</sup> BANCROFT, J. 1982. Trees for cavity-dwelling birds. *Blue Jay* 40:166-167.
- <sup>2</sup> BENT, A.C. 1964. Life histories of North American woodpeckers. Dover, N.Y. 334 pp.

- <sup>3</sup> LAWRENCE, R.D. 1974. Wildlife in North America. Birds. Thomas Nelson and Sons, Don Mills. 256 pp.
- <sup>4</sup> DENNIS, J.V. 1981. Beyond the bird feeder. A.A. Knopf Inc., New York, N.Y. 201 pp.
- <sup>5</sup> GODFREY, W.E. 1966. The birds of Canada. Nat. Mus. Canada Bull. 203. 428 pp.
- <sup>6</sup> HARRISON, H.H. 1975. A field guide to birds' nests in the United States east of the Mississippi River. Houghton Mifflin, Boston. 257 pp.
- <sup>7</sup> STOKES, D.W. and L.Q. STOKES 1983. A guide to bird behavior Vol II. Little, Brown and Co., Toronto. 334 pp.

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## HELPING INJURED WILDLIFE

The **Manitoba Wildlife Rehabilitation Organization** has been established to care for injured or orphaned native wildlife, mainly birds and small mammals. The organization has a 5 acre wooded site in Winnipeg, close to both veterinary services and the city zoo, where it hopes to establish a facility for treatment and release. The demand for this type of facility appears to have been increasing over the past few years. Interested people often run into a dead end in trying to find help for injured wildlife where they lack the expertise, equipment for treatment or the facilities to house them. Finding that facilities do exist can only encourage these people to further their interest in wildlife conservation, and will increase the voice supporting programs such as habitat preservation.

Some MWRO members have been dealing with injured or orphaned wildlife for many years. For example Renate Scriven has been caring for injured wild birds since she was 8 years old. During 1985-1986 she and her parents handled "more than 700 birds, including eagles, hawks, owls, herons, gulls, waterfowl and hummingbirds. About 450 of these were eventually released to the wild."

Those who wish to assist in the establishment and operation of this facility should apply for membership in the organization to **Manitoba Wildlife Rehabilitation Organization, P.O. Box 242, Station "C," Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3M 3S7** or telephone **(204) 888-3094**.