

# FIRST CONFIRMED RECORD OF PYGMY NUTHATCH IN SASKATCHEWAN

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During the late afternoon of 6 November 2023, I conducted a count of my regularly occurring back-yard feeder birds when an unusual looking bird caught my attention. I was quite surprised to immediately recognize the bird as a Pygmy Nuthatch (*Sitta pygmaea*). I had been to British Columbia a couple of months earlier and had hoped to find this species there, so its image was still fresh in my mind. A quick run to grab my camera resulted in a few lower quality images that were just good enough to confirm the identification. I had missed the bird in BC and was astonished that this species, a new one for my “life list”, was now in my backyard, in Regina. The bird was at the feeder for approximately two minutes and did not return that day. Hopeful that it would return the next day, I informed several people of the Pygmy Nuthatch and seven birders showed up the next morning to look for the bird. Over the next two months, the bird visited my feeders and at last count at least 61 people had seen this bird and excellent photos were taken (Figure 1). Often the first indication the bird was present was its loud piping call, which is unlike those uttered by other nuthatches found in Saskatchewan. There are two hypothetical records (single observer, sight only record) for this species in Saskatchewan, but this is the first confirmed record.

## Habitat, Range and Movement

Pygmy Nuthatches inhabit the mountainous areas from the extreme southern interior of British Columbia through the western states and well into central Mexico.<sup>1</sup> This species is considered non-migratory, with populations being mostly sedentary except for some post-breeding wandering to both higher and lower elevations. Pygmy Nuthatches



**FIGURE 1.** More than 60 people had the opportunity to observe and take photographs of Saskatchewan's first confirmed Pygmy Nuthatch. Photo credit: Annie McLeod.

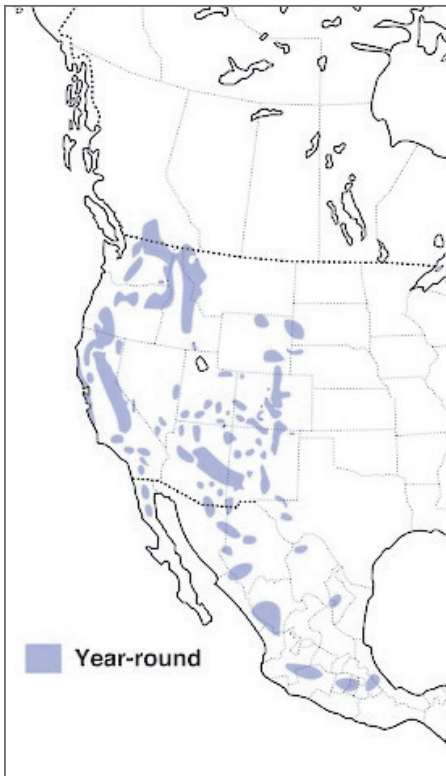
show a strong preference for long-needle pines and are one of the most abundant species in Ponderosa, Jeffrey and other long-needle pine forests.<sup>1</sup> Coincidentally, there are quite a few Scotch Pine and Blue Spruce along the easement by my house, which perhaps — along with my feeders — attracted the bird to this location. Pygmy Nuthatch distribution is rather patchy, reflecting the patchily distributed pine forests they require (Figure 2).

There are three confirmed eBird records of Pygmy Nuthatch from Alberta, all in the extreme southwest part of the province. These include two sight records, accompanied by field notes, from Rainy Ridge<sup>2</sup> and Waterton<sup>3</sup>; the lone record backed by a photo is from Mountain View, in 2008.<sup>4</sup> The two sight records are also from 2023. This lack of Alberta records is a bit surprising as the Pygmy Nuthatch's regular range

extends to Cranbrook, British Columbia, only about 100 km west of AB, and to Columbia Falls, Montana, about 80 km to the south.<sup>1</sup>

There are also confirmed Pygmy Nuthatch records from Fargo, North Dakota and adjoining Moorhead, Minnesota, in October 1996<sup>5</sup>, from Des Moines, Iowa in January 1977<sup>6</sup> and Algona, Iowa in October 2000.<sup>7</sup> There are two hypothetical records for Pygmy Nuthatch in the comprehensive *Birds of Saskatchewan*. One in Val Marie at Lise Perrault's feeder on 12 May 1999, and another — again at a feeder — far to the north at Murphy Lake near the town of Loon Lake, by Beth Dales, who described a “tiny nuthatch with a gray-brown cap”, in mid-May 2000.<sup>8</sup> Manitoba also has a hypothetical record of two Pygmy Nuthatch visiting a feeder at Reston on 23 October 1984.<sup>9</sup>

As a bird this unusual deserves



**FIGURE 2.** Pygmy Nuthatch Range Map from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Birds of the World.



**FIGURE 3.** The Pygmy Nuthatch preferred the peanut feeder, but was also seen on other feeders containing suet, hulled sunflower seeds and black oil sunflower seeds. Photo credit: Annie McLeod.

special attention, I posted the record on the American Birding Association Rare Bird Alert Facebook page. Among the comments received was interesting information from birders who live in the traditional Pygmy Nuthatch range. This year had seen an unprecedented dispersal, starting this past summer, to the coast of Oregon and lowlands of northern California<sup>10</sup> and this fall to Victoria, BC<sup>11</sup> and along the Washington coast.<sup>12</sup> A significant irruption apparently occurred but the cause is unclear, although the recent widespread wildfires in the west and the resulting habitat loss may have played a part.

## Feeding

The Pygmy Nuthatch preferred the peanut feeder (Figure 3) but also spent time on other feeders that contain suet, black oil sunflower and hulled sunflower seeds. Exhibiting typical nuthatch behaviour, it cached food in the surrounding trees in crevices amid the bark of branches and trunk.<sup>1</sup> It dominated the peanut feeder, often chasing White-breasted (*S. carolinensis*) and Red-breasted (*S. canadensis*) nuthatches, Black-capped Chickadees

(*Poecile atricapillus*) and even the House Finches (*Haemorhous mexicanus*) and only gave way to the much larger Downy Woodpecker (*Dryobates pubescens*). I also observed the bird on the ground consuming small pieces of ice and taking larger chunks into a tree and pecking them as it did with peanuts.

On 10 January 2024, the temperature dropped to -27 °C followed by a few days of -30 to -35 °C and the Pygmy Nuthatch was not seen again. But what a pleasure to have such an interesting bird in my yard that enticed so many fantastic people to come for a visit.

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