

Avoiding Nuthatches

By mid-August of 1992 I had been living in Las Cruces, New Mexico, for three whole months. Long enough to have learned to ignore Great-tailed Grackles.

To dial out the syncopated murmurings of the White-winged Doves in the streetside cottonwoods. To avert my glance at the sight of a Chihuahuan Raven. I had grown accustomed to daily encounters with Black-chinned Hummingbirds in the flower garden, with sassy Curve-billed Thrashers in the supermarket parking lot, with the colony of knock-kneed Burrowing Owls in the trailer park. On one occasion, I went so far as to shrug off a Greater Roadrunner.

You see, I sought rarer icterids, columbids, and corvids. I needed Plain-capped Starthroat, not another Black-chin. I wanted a trade-in (Bendire's, please) for my storefront Curve-bills. I was more interested in finding Whiskered Screech-Owls and Boreal Owls—both breed in New Mexico, by the way—than in monitoring the domestic affairs of the neighborhood Burrowing Owls. (Admittedly, I never again passed on a Greater Roadrunner—that was an act of temporary insanity.)

What to do? The Chiricahua Mountains, a couple hundred miles to the west of Las Cruces, provided an obvious solution. A starthroat was being reported at the Portal post office. Bendire's Thrasher was said to be reliable in the desert east of town. Whiskered Screech-Owl was going to be easy. (And Boreal Owl was, needless to say, out of the question.)

My traveling companion was one Kei Sochi; she had just flown in from Philadelphia. Our first Portal-area destination was the legendary backyard feeding station of the late Sally Spofford. Here we found lots of birders and lots of birds—House Finches up on one of the platform feeders, snarfing down millet and cracked corn; White-winged Doves below, gathering up the spillage; and a family of White-breasted Nuthatches in the

oaks behind us. A Brown-headed Cowbird flew over, but nobody called it. And an Acorn Woodpecker—equal parts dashing and graceless, dangling from one of the hanging feeders—received no mention. After all, this is the species about which Jim Lane famously quipped, in the 1974 edition of his *Birder's Guide to Southeastern Arizona*: “If you miss this bird in places like Molina Basin, Madera Canyon, or Cave Creek Canyon, you are not really birding.”

Somebody broke the silence: “Just a bunch of trash bir... —*Lucifer Hummingbird by the house!*” A dozen binoculars trained on *le petit prince* of the Spoffords' backyard. He was a dandy—draped in a jade cape, emblazoned with a royal gorget, armed with a little saber.

Click. I glanced at Kei, who was fiddling with her camera. *Click.* Something didn't compute. I looked her way again. To my puzzlement, she was angling for better viewing of the nuthatches in the old oak tree.

“They have nuthatches in Philadelphia,” I reminded her.

She cheerfully went about her business.



Come to think of it, Kei engaged in all sorts of cheerful and puzzling behavior during our week in southeastern Arizona. And she kept a record of it, in her journal. What follows, then, are some highlights from that first visit of hers to the oak-and-juniper woodlands of Cave Creek Canyon and environs.

- On listing and warblers: “Finally, a warbler ventured close by and I got a view of lifebird number whatever, the Hermit Warbler.”
- On another warbler, *Wilsonia pusilla*: “A funny-looking fellow he was, with a black cap and bright yellow face.”
- On the general matter of looking for warblers: “My neck soon tired of the exercise, and I busied myself with braiding long pine needles together and listening to the soft trickling of water in a nearby creek.”

- On my birding abilities: “Ted pished mightily but to no avail.”
- On one of the birders at the starthroat stakeout: “He bore an uncanny resemblance to Boris Yeltsin.”
- On the décor of the Portal Café: “The centerpiece was a coat rack constructed of a bunch of deer hooves stuck into a wooden board.”

Meanwhile, White-breasted Nuthatches managed to insert themselves seemingly anywhere in Kei’s journal:

- “For another hour I desperately swatted away the bugs, waited for the White-breasted Nuthatch to return to the feeders, and followed the Acorn Woodpeckers as they chased each other around the TV antenna.”
- “We all would have missed the Lucifer, had the other nice man in the yard (who kindly helped me get photos of the White-breasted Nuthatch) not been watching the feeders.”
- “My favorite was the White-breasted Nuthatch.”

Finally, a remark made seemingly in passing but not inconsequentially:

- “Today I read an article in *Winging It* (the American Birding Association’s newsletter) about the long-suffering wife of an avid birder. But I am undeterred!”



It was a cold and seemingly inconsequential January morning, ten-and-a-half years later, at our home in Boulder, Colorado. A good day to work on my county list.

What to do? I had already ticked the Great-tailed Grackle—uncommon in the county—at the feedlots. A stray White-winged Dove near Longmont could wait. A report of a small flock of Chihuahuan Ravens didn’t seem credible and was therefore not worth the chase.

Kei suggested that I spend the morning along Boulder Creek, always a good bet for an overwintering easterner—a Winter Wren holed up in a thicket, or a Rusty Blackbird in the leaf litter, or maybe an Eastern Bluebird on a snag. Instead, I encountered one westerner after another: Black-billed Magpie (*maa-ag?*), American Dipper (*beet! beet!*), Spotted Towhee (*bzweee*). Then: *Yank, Yank*.

I knew the call, for sure; but I fumbled momentarily for an ID. Then it hit me: It was a White-breasted Nuthatch, of course—but not of the expected *nelsoni* race. Those birds give a stuttering *st’it’it’* call, completely unlike the honest-to-goodness *Yank, Yank* of the eastern *carolinensis* race. This was a good bird, and a

valuable tick for my Boulder County “Ultimate Big Year”—an effort to document as many field-identifiable forms as possible.

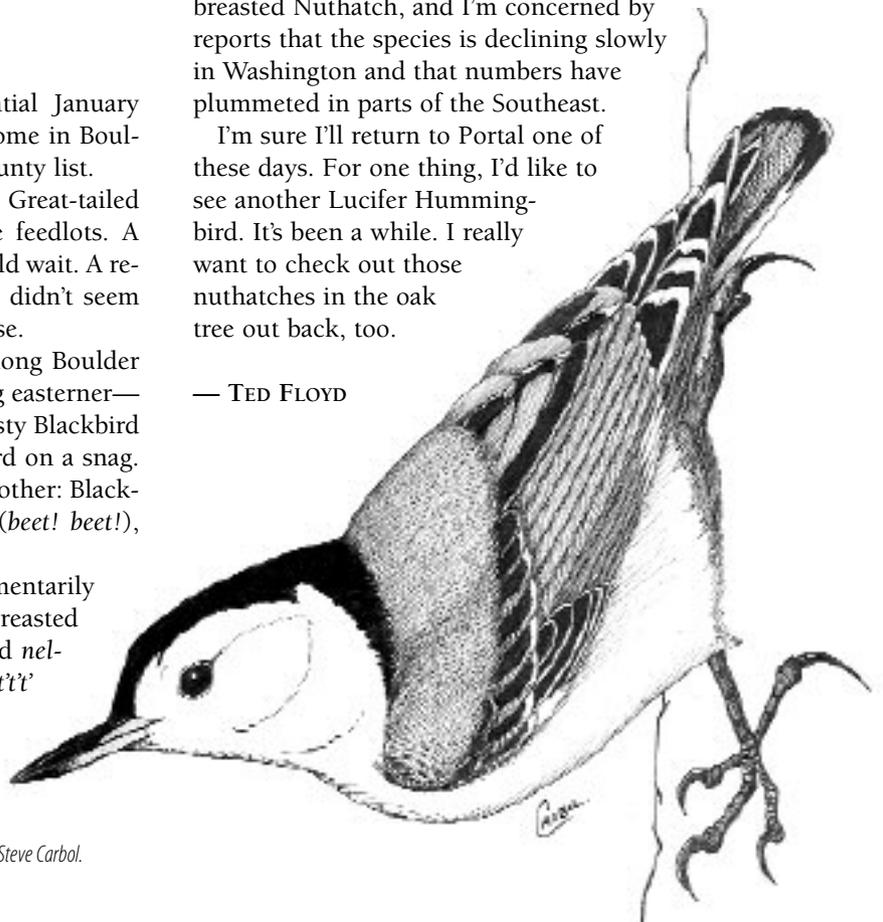
But it was more than “a good bird”. This nuthatch was an *objet d’art*, although not after the manner of the coquettish Lucifer Hummingbird back at Portal. Rather, it was a study in subtlety. I strained to make out the irregular black splotches on the bird’s folded wings, and I worked hard for a satisfactory look at its comparatively wide crown stripe. I think I even convinced myself of its stouter, thicker bill.



Like Ogden Nash’s whimsical Nuthatch Avider, I used to turn a blind eye on *Sitta carolinensis*. No more. I’ve discovered—with a little help from a friend—that the White-breasted Nuthatch is a good bird and an *objet d’art*. More to the point, it is intrinsically interesting. I’d like to get a better handle on differences among the various western populations. I’ve heard there’s variation within eastern *carolinensis*, but I haven’t had a chance to observe it for myself. I’d like to know more about migration and population cycles in the White-breasted Nuthatch, and I’m concerned by reports that the species is declining slowly in Washington and that numbers have plummeted in parts of the Southeast.

I’m sure I’ll return to Portal one of these days. For one thing, I’d like to see another Lucifer Hummingbird. It’s been a while. I really want to check out those nuthatches in the oak tree out back, too.

— TED FLOYD



Eastern White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis carolinensis*). © Steve Carbol.