



## Red-breasted Nuthatch in Norfolk: new to Britain and Ireland

Jean Aley and Roy Aley

At 13.30 GMT on 13th October 1989, at Holkham Meals, Norfolk, we were watching a group of tits *Parus* and Goldcrests *Regulus regulus* when we noticed an unusual nuthatch *Sitta* feeding on a grassy footpath some 6 m ahead of us. We watched it for several seconds before it flew into an adjacent pine for a moment, and then away through the trees.

The bird was the shape of a European Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*, with a short tail and fine bill, but was clearly smaller: at the time we estimated it to be  $4\frac{1}{2}$  inches (11 cm) long. The upperparts, excluding the head, were blue-grey and all the underparts pinky-buff. The head showed a black eye-stripe with a clear white supercilium and a black crown.

The shape and plumage were clearly those of a nuthatch, but *europaea* was ruled out by the size and head pattern. We had no means of identifying the bird at the time, although, subsequently, we looked at a European field guide and had to consider Corsican Nuthatch *S. whiteheadi*; our bird, however, was pinker below, and did not seem to fit in other respects, either.

We looked for it again, with a local birder, but could not relocate it; we soon found out, of course, that it was identified the next day as a Red-breasted Nuthatch *S. canadensis*. It stayed until at least 6th May 1990 (*Brit. Birds* 84: 495).

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EDITORIAL COMMENT Rob Hume, Chairman of the BBRC, and Dr David Parkin, Chairman of the BOURC, have added the following comments: 'The identification of this individual was no problem once the slightly larger, paler

Corsican Nuthatch and the superficially similar Krüper's Nuthatch *S. krueperi* (which has a discrete red-brown chest patch) were excluded. Mr and Mrs Aley sent sufficiently detailed notes and a sketch to make identification possible, but Paul Varney and Dave Hatton, both of Cambridge, saw the bird on 14th, locating and identifying it independently, but simultaneously. Their account added more detail, and further descriptions were rendered unnecessary as, after initial



Plates 36 & 37. Red-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta canadensis*, Norfolk, March 1990 (R. C. Wilson)



incredulity, people descended on Holkham Meals in their hundreds to see the bird. Indeed, it developed into one of the largest gatherings of birdwatchers so far seen in the UK, a situation not helped by the narrowness of the paths, the elusive nature of the bird and the desperation of a few observers literally fighting for a better vantage point. Some people visited eight or more times without seeing it at all, and many needed a second or third attempt before catching a glimpse. For others, however, it performed remarkably well. By listening for its distinctive call, or by following the tit flocks, or by simply waiting in a favoured spot for the Nuthatch to appear, many people were able to see and photograph it during its stay of several months (*Brit. Birds* 83: 154, plates 92-94, 323, plate 196; 88: plates 36 & 37).

‘Close examination showed the bird to be a well-marked individual, but whether it was a male or a bright female is uncertain. The forehead and crown were jet-black (although some observers noted a faint grey tinge to the crown), extending to the nape. The supercilium was striking and bold, pure white from just behind the bill to the sides of the nape; below this was a long, broad, black eye-stripe, flaring out at the rear and slightly irregular on the lower edge. The chin, throat and lower ear-coverts were off-white, merging into dull, pale rufous on the neck and upper breast, with a slightly blotchy effect. The breast, central belly and undertail-coverts were pale rufous, becoming a slightly richer, more orange colour on the flanks. The upperparts were blue-grey with darker tips to the alula and primary coverts and centres to the tertials, secondaries and exposed primary tips; the uppertail-coverts were blue-grey, and the tail blackish with small white patches near the tips of the outer feathers. The bill was straight along the culmen, while the lower edge curved upwards slightly towards the tip; it appeared bluish-grey with a whiter base and an extensive blackish tip to the lower mandible. The legs and feet were slightly pinkish-grey.

‘A distinctive (and helpful) feature of the bird was its call: a quiet, nasal “neh-neh” usually repeated four to five times (sometimes in bursts of up to 15 calls) and an occasional louder, strident, more trumpet-like version which carried for 50 m or more. It responded quickly to a tape-recording and called in flight as it approached.

‘The Red-breasted Nuthatch was only occasionally seen again on the ground and usually proved remarkably elusive in the mature pines, often feeding at the very tips of high branches, but also hugging the larger trunks in typical nuthatch fashion. All too often it was located by one or two people, but then, by the time others reached the spot, had moved on.

‘Red-breasted Nuthatch is a common to abundant species in eastern North America, with a pattern of migration that is variable, and sometimes irruptive. It is quite regular on Sable Island, and has been recorded in Bermuda. Ken Kaufman (*Amer. Birds* 44: 39-169), in a review of autumn 1989, reported that many regions of northeastern and central North America recorded extremely high numbers of Red-breasted Nuthatches, with 350 on 8th October on Seal Island off the coast of Nova Scotia. There is a record from Iceland in May 1970; K. D. G. Mitchell reported (*in litt.*) that he saw one on board the *Aquitania* in October 1943, a day out from Halifax, Nova Scotia; and one was on board the *Queen Mary* 350 km out from New York on 1st October 1963 (*Brit. Birds* 65: 432). So, the species is not averse to crossing the sea, and it clearly is a possible

vagrant; it was listed as a candidate species by Chandler S. Robbins (*Brit. Birds* 73: 448-457).

'There have been no records of the species ever being imported into western Europe, so the likelihood of escape must be negligible. Under these circumstances, the record was accepted as relating to a wild bird, and Red-breasted Nuthatch was admitted into Category A of the British & Irish List.

'There were few other Nearctic arrivals in Britain and Ireland during October 1989, although this bird might have arrived earlier, since Red-eyed Vireo *Vireo olivaceus* and Northern Parula *Parula americana* were found in Cornwall and Co. Cork respectively on 25th September. The Nuthatch could either have moved down the coast to arrive at Holkham, or (perhaps less likely in view of its distinctive call) have remained undetected in the pines for several days.'



The inclusion of plates 36 & 37 in colour was subsidised by *Carl Zeiss (Oberkochen) Ltd*, sponsor of the British Birds Rarities Committee.