

Get Wild: Winter birds are counting on you^[OBJ]

Staff



Pygmy nuthatches hang on Suet feeder in northern Summit County in December 2022.
Bill Betz/Get Wild

Pygmy nuthatches are frequent visitors to our winter suet feeder. Delightful small birds, *Sitta pygmaea* often perch upside down. Routinely, we see three to four, their quick movements captivating. When visiting bird feeders, they quickly grab a seed and fly back into a tree. Wedging the seed into a bark crevice, they pound it open with their bill. Pygmy nuthatches have a distinctive gray cap, creamy breast and gray back, plus a diminutive size at 4.25 inches long and weighing 0.37 ounces. Enjoy these little visitors’ antics at your feeders.

The pygmy nuthatch is one of three species of nuthatches in Colorado. The others are the white-breasted (*Sitta carolinensis*) and red-breasted (*Sitta canadensis*), which are easily distinguished by the color of their chests. The white-breasted is also much larger, with white cheeks and a bold black head stripe, while the red-breasted is smaller, with dark stripes on either side of the head.

All three nuthatches are short-tailed and long-billed, with a unique tree-climbing method: they often climb head-down, feasting on insects from bark crevices, but not drilling into bark like woodpeckers. They climb using one foot lower as a brace, the other foot placed higher and gripping the bark, allowing them to move in any direction. They are year-round residents in our area, nesting in pine forests.

The pygmy nuthatch’s call is a high, clear, hard peeping usually given in chorus in flocks: an amazing variety of loud chips, most frequently bip-bip-bip, with many higher squawks. The range of the pygmy nuthatch includes one population along the coast ranges of central California, and another in the Rocky Mountains south into Mexico, whereas the other nuthatches are widespread.

While we delight in our familiar bird visitors, birds are declining in large numbers worldwide. According to the 2022 Annual State of the Birds Report, the past 50 years have seen losses of 3 billion birds in North America. Migratory birds are suffering due to habitat loss and climate warming. The National Audubon Society states that populations of more than half of bird species are plummeting across all habitats.

For example, our little rufous hummingbird, a frequent summer visitor with his orange plumage and pugnacious manner towards our broad-tailed hummingbirds, is now a species of concern. You may also have noticed that the gray jay (“camp robber”) that was once so common, has largely disappeared as our pines succumbed to the pine bark beetle.

Because birds are indicators of the health of our environment, monitoring bird numbers is critical to assess that health, and to assess our conservation efforts to protect the biodiversity of our natural world.

Please help us monitor the numbers of birds in Summit County by participating in the local Audubon Christmas Bird Count Dec. 21. Conducted every year since 1901 by the National Audubon Society, volunteers count the numbers (and species) of birds within defined 15-mile circles. This data from all over the country are used for tracking those same areas in subsequent years.

Dr. Susan Bonfield, local ornithologist, needs more volunteers to help count within our Summit County circle. Email Karn

Stiegelmeier (karnstieg@comcast.net) if you can help. On Wednesday, Dec. 21, join others to visit various locations during the day, and count the birds you see. Your home is a good viewing spot if you live within the circle. You can be paired with more experienced birders if you aren’t confident in bird identification. Let’s help Summit County’s little feathered friends. The birds are counting on you to count them.



Joan Betz

Joan Betz is a retired biology professor from Regis University, and a board member of the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information,

visit EagleSummitWilderness.org .