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First Documented Nebraska Sighting of Brown-headed Nuthatch (*Sitta pusilla*)

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Monday, November 8, 2010, was an unusually warm (upper 70s) autumn day for Lincoln, Nebraska, with no clouds and a wind from the southwest. I went to Holmes Lake Park in southeast Lincoln to scan for late migrating waterfowl and then to check the stand of conifers for the arrival of winter migrants. I had no great expectations for the day, anticipating only the usual species for this time of the year.

Around 11 A.M. I was attracted to a feeding group of six Black-capped Chickadees and three Red-breasted Nuthatches in the 30- to 40-year-old pines and Douglas firs north of Hyde Observatory. I noticed a differently-patterned nuthatch in the group. I had seen a Pygmy Nuthatch several times in Lincoln, including two times at Holmes Lake Park and two times at Pioneers Park. This nuthatch, however, was not a Pygmy Nuthatch. I consulted *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America* and *The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America* and was able to identify the bird as a Brown-headed Nuthatch (*Sitta pusilla*). The nuthatch was about the same size as the Red-breasted Nuthatches it was feeding with in the pines. However, it appeared plumper and not as sleek as the Red-breasted Nuthatches. Noticeable upon seeing it was the rich brown crown and a



Brown-headed Nuthatch at Holmes Lake Park, Lancaster Co, 15 Nov 2010.
Photo by Jerry Mulliken.

dark eye line (not noticeable unless at close range). It was pale buff below. The short tail was obvious along with the white nape spot. The back and wings were gray with the primaries lighter gray. The throat and cheek were white. It was not very vocal; only snippets of sound were heard that could have been nuthatch utterances. After I was sure that it was a Brown-headed Nuthatch, I kept birding the area, making four attempts of varying lengths over two hours to observe the rare nuthatch.



Brown-headed Nuthatch at Holmes Lake Park, Lancaster Co, 13 Nov 2010. Photo by Phil Swanson.

When I arrived home, I made further searches in other field guides. I was convinced that I had found a Brown-headed Nuthatch. I then posted an account of my sightings on NEBirds. Later that day Mark Brogie, chairman of the NOU Records Committee, responded and requested documentation on the nuthatch, which was submitted a few days later. Later on November 9, I searched for information on the Brown-headed Nuthatch on the internet. On the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology website I watched and listened to about 10 videos shot by Timothy Barksdale in January 1998. One of the videos almost seemed as if I had recorded it myself.

I visited Holmes Lake Park on November 9 and 10 and again found the Brown-headed Nuthatch in the same area. By this time the word was out and other birders were coming to see the nuthatch. On November 10, Clem Klaphake and Ruth Stearns reported finding two Brown-headed Nuthatches. Subsequently quite a few birders (100+) from around Nebraska and surrounding states made the nuthatch pilgrimage to Holmes. Birders kept this up for at least a couple of months. Many

observers were able to see the Brown-headed Nuthatch and some were able to document it by photographing or videotaping it. I saw the Brown-headed Nuthatch on the following dates: November 8, 9, 10, 13, 17 and 21 and December 5 and 28, 2010, and on January 5 and 14, 2011. Four extended searches of the area in February produced no further sightings. The last sighting was reported late in January by another birder who did not think the bird looked healthy. The Lincoln Christmas Bird Count on December 18 included the observation of two Brown-headed Nuthatches at Holmes Lake Park. In all of my searches, I only saw one Brown-headed Nuthatch, but I saw it at several different locations in the area north of the clubhouse parking lot and in the area around Hyde Observatory. I walked these areas in search of a second nuthatch, but I never encountered more than one at a time in my searches.

We can only speculate why this bird (or birds) chose the conifer plantings at Holmes Lake Park for their stay in Nebraska and why they were so far from their southeastern haunts (coastal states from east Texas to Virginia). Brown-headed Nuthatches are considered non-migratory (Withgott and Smith 1998). They are not known for irruptive movements (Renfrow 2003). Nevertheless, vagrant Brown-headed Nuthatches have been found both in the eastern United States (Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania) and in the Midwest (Kansas, Kentucky and Missouri) (Renfrow 2003). There is even a report with "suspect details" from Nebraska in 1896 (Renfrow 2003). Until now, there were no documented sightings of Brown-headed Nuthatch in Nebraska. How long the birds were present before they were found is not known. Lincoln temperatures in November and December were close to average, but January was colder than usual, with 15 nights below 10° F. (LWC 2011) The birds may have succumbed to the recurring frigid weather or starved.

Lincoln is one of the few places in North America where all four North American species of nuthatches (White-breasted, Red-breasted, Pygmy and Brown-headed) have been seen. Holmes Lake Park is where I can say that I have seen and heard all four species of nuthatches in the last two years.

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