

2009

*Birds of the Rocky Mountains*—Species Accounts,  
pages 278–286: Titmice & Nuthatches

Paul A. Johnsgard

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, pajohnsgard@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/bioscibirdsrockymtns>



Part of the [Ornithology Commons](#)

---

Johnsgard, Paul A., "Birds of the Rocky Mountains—Species Accounts, pages 278–286: Titmice & Nuthatches" (2009). *Birds of the Rocky Mountains -- Paul A. Johnsgard*. 19.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/bioscibirdsrockymtns/19>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Papers in the Biological Sciences at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Birds of the Rocky Mountains -- Paul A. Johnsgard by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## Black-capped Chickadee (*Parus atricapillus*)

*Identification:* This titmouse closely resembles the mountain chickadee, but has its black "cap" extending from the crown down through the eyes in an unbroken manner, so that the white also appears as a continuous patch. Its call is a whistled "phoe-be," with both notes clear and loud, and the second on a lower pitch than the first. Its song consists of a "chick-a-dee-dee-dee . . ."

### LATILONG STATUS

R	R	R	r
r	R	R	R
R	R	R	R

R	R	R	R
r	R	R	R
r	R	r	R

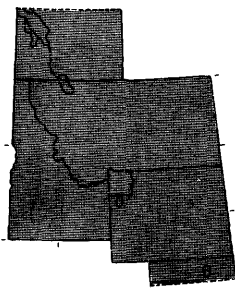
r	M	R	r
	R	r	R
W	R	R	R

*Habitats and Ecology:* Associated with a wide variety of wooded habitats, both of coniferous and hardwood types, and breeding wherever suitable nesting cavities exist. These typically consist of old woodpecker holes, but sometimes the birds excavate their own nest cavities in the rotted wood of dead stumps. Bird houses are also occasionally used. Aspen groves and riparian woodlands are favored nesting areas in the Rocky Mountain region.

*Seasonality:* This species is a permanent resident throughout the area, although some seasonal shifts in distribution do occur. In Colorado, egg records extend from June 23 to July 4, although nest-building in Rocky Mountain N.P. has been observed as early as March 23. In Wyoming, nest-building has been observed in early May, and eggs found as early as May 20. Egg records in Montana extend from May 12 to July 28.

*Comments:* This is the most widespread and familiar of the North American titmice, and one that is often attracted to winter bird feeders, especially if suet is available. During the winter pair bonds appear to dissolve, and a certain degree of flocking often occurs.

*Suggested Reading:* Odum, 1941-42; Brewer, 1963; Sturman, 1968a, 1968b; Smith, 1974.



## Mountain Chickadee (*Parus gambelii*)

*Identification:* Resembles the preceding species, but the white facial markings are interrupted by a black line extending through the eye region from behind. The song is nearly the same as that of the black-capped chickadee, but the call is usually a three- or four-noted descending whistle.

*Status:* A resident in mountain forests of the region, occurring in all the montane parks and probably breeding in all. More montane in distribution than the previous species.

*Habitats and Ecology:* Largely limited to montane coniferous forests, and usually absent from deciduous stands, although aspens are frequently used for nesting. Prefers open coniferous forests, especially pines, including both ponderosa pines and also pinyons. Woodpecker holes or self-excavated cavities in rotted wood are used for nesting.

*Seasonality:* A permanent resident throughout the region. Egg records in Colorado extend from April 5 to June 30, while Wyoming records are from May 31 to July 1. In Montana nests have been found from June until late July.

*Comments:* Like many other species, these birds tend to move upwards in elevation after the breeding season, and at times may winter close to timberline, although more commonly the birds retreat toward the plains at that time.

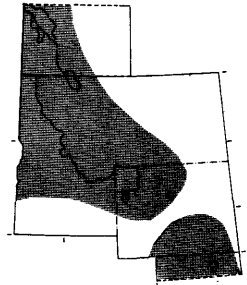
*Suggested Reading:* Dixon & Gilbert, 1964; Minoch, 1971; Bent, 1946.

### LATILONG STATUS

R	R	R	?
r	R	R	R
R	R	R	R

R	R	R	r
r	R	R	R
r	R	R	R

r	r	r	r
	r	r	r
R	R	R	R



## Boreal Chickadee (*Parus hudsonicus*)

*Identification:* This is the only North American chickadee with a brown rather than a black cap, and its back and flanks are also distinctly brownish, although not nearly such a bright brown as occurs in the chestnut-backed chickadee. Its call consists of wheezy and hoarse notes, without clear whistles.

LATILONG STATUS

r	R	R	
		r	R
V			



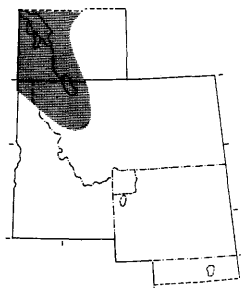
*Status:* A permanent resident in coniferous forests of the northern part of the region, breeding south at least to central Montana, and occurring in all the montane parks to the north of that point, and probably breeding in all of them.

*Habitats and Ecology:* Associated with coniferous forests, including swampy areas and muskegs on lower elevations, as well as those of montane areas. Nesting occurs in trees and stumps, either in old woodpecker holes or in self-excavated holes. Rabbit hair is often used as a nest-lining material.

*Seasonality:* There are relatively few nest records, but in Alberta the egg records extend from April 18 to June 13. Dependent young in Montana have been noted as late as August 1.

*Comments:* Boreal chickadees tend to winter in flocks, with pair formation occurring in late winter, then aggressive activity breaks up the flocks and pairs begin to form. Nest-inspection behavior may be a part of pair-forming behavior in these birds, and although they may pair for life they evidently do not use the same nest site in subsequent years.

*Suggested Reading:* McLaren, 1975; McClelland, 1977; Dixon, 1961.



## Chestnut-backed Chickadee (*Parus rufescens*)

*Identification:* This is the only North American chickadee with bright rufous flank and back coloration. It has a sooty-black cap, and its call is a harsh and sibilant *shik-zee-zee*. It lacks clear, whistled call-notes.

*Status:* A permanent resident in the wetter coniferous forests of the western slopes of the region, south to about central Montana. A common breeder only in Glacier N.P.; not yet reported for Yoho or Kootenay.

*Habitats and Ecology:* In this region essentially limited to the western hemlock, western redcedar association, but farther west having a broader ecological range extending into some deciduous woodlands adjacent to coniferous forests. Areas of stream courses and other forest margins are favored for foraging, and nesting occurs in woodpecker holes or self-excavated cavities.

*Seasonality:* Nesting records for the region are few, but in Washington the egg records extend from April 7 to June 10, with the majority for the period May 9 to 24. In Montana incubation has been observed on June 5, and feeding of young on July 15 and 16.

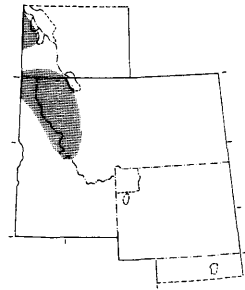
*Comments:* This species, perhaps more than any other bird of the region, has a range that conforms to that of the moist Pacific Northwest coniferous forest, which is best developed along the coast of Washington and British Columbia, but is locally extended inland on the wettest west-facing slopes of the Rockies in Montana and adjoining Canada.

*Suggested Reading:* McClelland, 1977; Sturman, 1968a, 1968b; Dixon, 1961.

### LATILONG STATUS

r	R	R	
r	R	R	
R	r	M	?





## Plain Titmouse (*Parus inornatus*)

**Identification:** The only typical titmouse of the region, with a chickadee-like shape but also with a small, bushy crest. In this species the plumage is almost uniformly gray, and no black or white evident anywhere. The species has a harsh *tsick-a-dee-dee . . .* song that is very much like that of a typical chickadee's.

LATILONG STATUS


	?	V V

R	M	V
S	R	

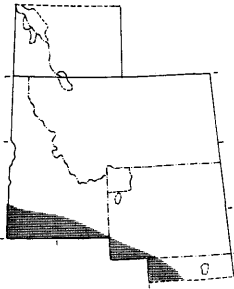
**Status:** A summer or permanent resident in the southwestern portions of the region, from the Snake River southward in Idaho, and in the southwestern and northwestern portions of Wyoming and Colorado, respectively. Common and probably breeding at Dinosaur N.M.

**Habitats and Ecology:** In this region associated almost exclusively with the pinyon-juniper association; in some other areas also extending into oak woodlands. Nesting is usually done in cavities of partially decayed and split-open trunks of junipers. They sometimes also use woodpecker holes, and occasionally will nest in birdhouses.

**Seasonality:** There are few regional records, but Colorado egg records extend from early May to May 21.

**Comments:** At least in California these birds tend to maintain permanent pair bonds, and very rarely mate with a new individual for as long as their original mate remains alive. They are relatively sedentary, and often nest in the same site in succeeding years.

**Suggested Reading:** Bent, 1946; Price, 1936.



## Bushtit (*Psaltriparus minimus*)

*Identification:* This bird resembles a small chickadee in shape, but has a very long tail (about as long as the body) and is rather uniformly dull gray throughout, with a short black bill and pale yellow eyes, at least in our region. It usually is to be found in small flocks, feeding in low woodland trees and bushes and uttering sharp single-noted contact calls.

*Status:* Limited to the southern edge of our area, where it is most likely to be found in pinyon pine-juniper woodlands, and similar scrub oak-mountain mahogany habitats. Within the geographic limits of this book it is evidently mainly a nonbreeding vagrant, since the birds often move into ponderosa pines following breeding.

*Habitats and Ecology:* Commonest in open woodlands such as pinyon pine and juniper habitats, these birds also at times occur in sagebrush or even aspen-covered hillsides. Nests are usually in pinyon pines or junipers, and are beautiful soft, woven hanging structures woven of mosses, spider webs and hair or feathers, with lateral entrances and usually are less than ten feet above ground.

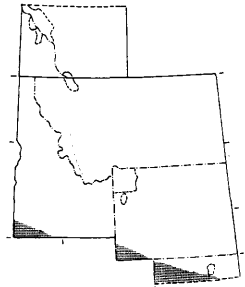
*Seasonality:* A permanent resident in most of Colorado and northern Utah, but seasonal or erratic at the extreme northern limits of its range in our region. In northern Utah the nesting records extend from April 25 to July 15, while in Colorado there are egg records for late April and early May.

*Suggested Reading:* Bent, 1946; Bailey & Niedrach, 1965.

### LATILONG STATUS



M		
M		M M
r	M	S



## Red-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta canadensis*)

*Identification:* This small nuthatch (4 inches long) is the only North American species of the group that has a distinct black line extending back from the eye in the same manner as found in the mountain chickadee. It also has reddish brown flanks, but these are rather obscure in females. Its call is a nasal *nyack*, often repeated.

### LATILONG STATUS

R	R	R	
r	R	R	R
R	R	R	r

R	r	R	r
r	R	R	
S	R	R	R

r	r	r	r
M	R	r	M
R	R	r	R

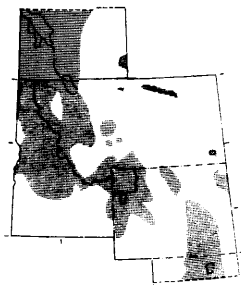
*Status:* Found in montane coniferous forests throughout the entire region, and a variably common breeding species in all the montane parks.

*Habitats and Ecology:* Limited largely but not entirely to coniferous forests, primarily those of relatively tall firs, and much of the foraging occurs at rather high portions of the trees. To a much more limited degree aspens and riparian woodlands are sometimes also used. Breeding occurs in the trunks of dead trees or the rotting portions of live trees, with the birds typically excavating their own nesting holes.

*Seasonality:* A permanent resident throughout the region. Egg records from Colorado are from May 17 to June 7, and from May 15 to July 25 in Montana. In Alberta, nest-excavation behavior has been observed as late as June 13, and in Montana nestlings have been noted into late July.

*Comments:* This species is unusual in that after the nest has been nearly excavated, both members of the pair bring resin in their bills and spread it above and below the nest hole. The function of this behavior is still somewhat obscure, but it probably helps deter other animals from entering the hole.

*Suggested Reading:* Kilham, 1972, 1973; McClelland, 1977; Anderson, 1976.





## White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*)

*Identification:* This nuthatch is rather easily identified by its black "cap" that does not extend down to the eyes, which are thus entirely surrounded by white. Like all nuthatches it often forages in an upside-down manner on tree trunks, and has a rather nasal voice, which in this species' case includes a *yank-yank* call reminiscent of a toy trumpet.

*Status:* A permanent resident of deciduous forests and woodlands nearly throughout the region; rather rare in the Canadian montane parks, and known to breed only from Glacier N.P. southward.

*Habitats and Ecology:* Largely confined to deciduous forests, but also extending into riparian woods and at least the lower zones of coniferous forest, especially the ponderosa pine zone and also locally into the pinyon zone. Nesting occurs in old woodpecker holes or in self-excavated holes in rotted wood of dead trees or partially dead ones.

*Seasonality:* A permanent resident throughout the region. Egg records in Colorado extend from May 13 to June 25, and in Montana active nests have been reported on June 17 and 25, the latter just hatched. Dependent young have been seen there in July.

*Comments:* These birds maintain their pair bonds for much of the year, and perhaps permanently, although in winter the members of the pair have little contact with one another and roost in different areas. This is the most widely distributed of the North American nuthatches, and the most adaptable ecologically.

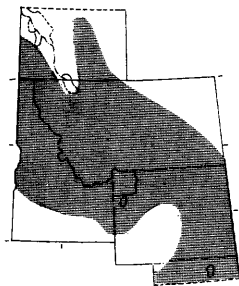
*Suggested Reading:* Kilham, 1968, 1971a, 1972; McClelland, 1977.

### LATILONG STATUS

R	R	r	
M	r	r	r
R	R	r	r

r	R	R	R
M	R	R	
	R	R	R

r		r	r
M	M	M	M
R	R	R	R



## Pygmy Nuthatch (*Sitta pygmaea*)

*Identification:* This is the smallest of the nuthatch species, and the only one in the region that does not have a black cap, although the grayish brown crown becomes darker near the eye. The call-notes include a high-pitched *peep* and a piping *wee-bee*.

### LATILONG STATUS

R	R		
M	R	?	
R	R	R	M

M		r	r
M	M		
	M	M	M

	r	M	M
			R
V	V	R	R

*Status:* A local resident in some portions of the region, mainly in the drier areas of southern Idaho and western Colorado, but also local in western Montana. Generally rare or absent in the montane parks, but common in Rocky Mountain N.P.

*Habitats and Ecology:* Primarily associated with the ponderosa pine zone, but also occurring locally in the pinyon-juniper zone. It generally forages fairly high in tall pines, but nests closer to the ground in snags or stubs that have rotted trunks providing excavation opportunities.

*Seasonality:* A permanent resident in the region. Egg records in Colorado extend from May 5 to June 18, and those from Rocky Mountain N.P. are from June 5 to 18.

*Comments:* This species has a range that fairly closely matches that of the ponderosa pine in the western states, although during summer the birds sometimes range as high as the Engelmann spruce zone and in winter they spread out into riparian woods lining grassland streams. During the fall months communal roosting sometimes occurs, with as many as 150 or more birds sharing a single roosting tree cavity.

*Suggested Reading:* Bock, 1969; Stallcup, 1968; Norris, 1958.

