

Pygmy Nuthatch

27 Jan 1977

Des Moines, Polk Co., IA

\*Halmi, \*Brown

to 15 Apr 1977, letter from B. Norris; Brooke 1977, Petersen and Halmi 1

Record Number: 81-GQ

Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATIONS

Woodward H. Brown, 26 Jan 1977

N. S. Halmi, 19 Feb 1977

PHOTOGRAPH

Peter C. Petersen, P-0014, (IBL 47:24-25).

LETTER

Bob Norris to Pete Petersen, 10 March 1977.

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 47:60

Brooke, M. 1977. A new Iowa record: Pygmy Nuthatch (*Sitta pygmaea*). IBL 47:24.

Photograph: IBL 47:24 (P-0014)

P.[Petersen], P., and N. H.[Halmi]. 1977. Editor's and Field Reports Editor's comments on the Pygmy Nuthatch. IBL 47:24-25.

RC 1981 3-I, 3-II, 1-III

II, Photos not diagnostic. Should get color photos.

I, Would seem to be impossible to differentiate from Brown-headed, except in hand and maybe not even then! What is the difference? I believe they (Pygmy and Brown-h.) are distinct populations of the same species.

II (with some reservations), Clearly *S. pusilla* or *S. pygmaea* from photos. Norris says *pygmaea* and his analysis seems sound. But note differences in description of head color (Brooke): brownish grey; brownish olive (Halmi), greyish olive (Brown). Are slides available?

II, obs. personally.

III, Extensive documentation. Inspection of pictures by an expert testifies for identity as *S. pygmaea*. The picture submitted with this record is of terrible quality. Norris apparently examined a better picture - a Kodachrome. Why didn't we have it. Until adequate photo evidence is submitted this otherwise strong record will have to be downgraded.

I, Photographs apparently conclusive -- sent to expert on species. Note especially white areas in tail (Norris).

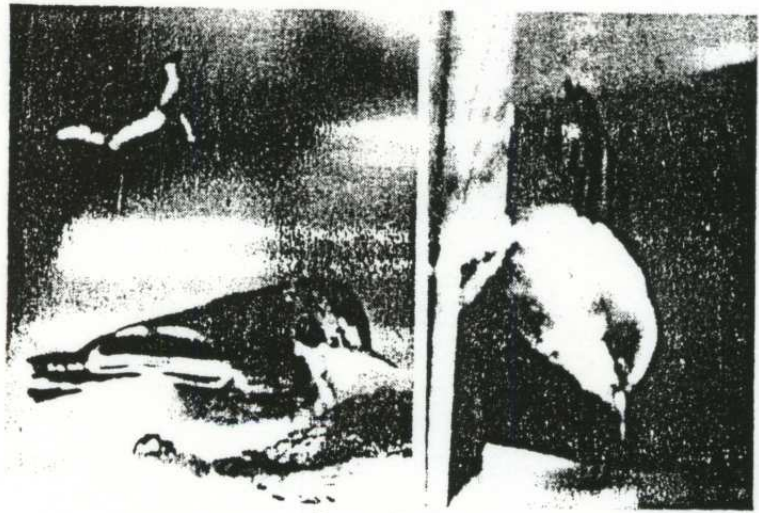
Pygmy Nuthatch

Brooke, M. 1977.  
A new Iowa record:  
A Pygmy Nuthatch  
(Sitta pygmaea) in  
Des Moines.  
Iowa Bird Life 47:24

A New Iowa Record: A Pygmy Nuthatch (*Sitta pygmaea*) in Des Moines -- A Pygmy Nuthatch had been frequenting the window shelf feeder at Dr. Lawrence Ely's home, 5400 Woodland Ave., for several weeks before it was observed by Woodward and Mary Brown and the author on January 26, 1977. The bird was very tame. We stood within two feet of the window as it returned again and again for sunflower seeds. All the field marks were easily noted: small size, short tail, brownish gray cap, whitish area on the nape, dark line through the eye and dull white underparts. No previous Iowa sightings have been recorded for this western species which is not normally found east of the Black Hills. MARGARET BROOKE, 126 51st St., Des Moines

Petersen, P. and  
N. Halmi. 1977  
Editor's and field  
report editor's  
comments on the  
Pygmy Nuthatch.  
Iowa Bird Life 47:24-25

Editor's and Field Reports Editor's comments on the Pygmy Nuthatch -- Pictures were taken of this bird by Mrs. Ely, who used an Instamatic camera and by the editor. Two of the editor's photos are reproduced below in black and white. Even the best color picture imaginable don't settle certain qualms about the specific identity of the bird seen: Pygmy Nuthatch or Brown-headed Nuthatch? Differential diagnosis is compounded by the probability that a Pygmy Nuthatch in Iowa would be of the Rocky Mountain subspecies, *Sitta pygmaea melanotis*, which has a browner cap than the nominate subspecies, and a darker eyestripe. The Brown-headed Nuthatch subspecies expected in the north would be *Sitta pusilla pusilla*, which has a brown cap. Brown-headed Nuthatches were allegedly seen in 1893 in Keokuk (A.C. Bent, *Life Histories of North American Nuthatches, Wrens, Thrashers and their Allies*, Dover Publications, New York, 1964 and A.O.U. Checklist, 5th Edition 1957), but for some reason the species isn't even on the hypothetical list for the state. So the two subspecies most likely to occur in Iowa have a somewhat brownish (*S. pygmaea melanotis*) vs. unequivocally brown (*S. pusilla p.*) cap -- a subtle chromatic distinction indeed.



Pygmy Nuthatch  
Photos by Peter C. Petersen

After seeing the bird on Feb. 19, we agree with Mrs. Brooke and Mr. Brown on the identification. It is our impression that *S. pygmaea* is more widespread in its range and more prone to vagrancy than *S. pusilla*, which is distributed in pockets and more sedentary. The bird in Des Moines is also very tame like (*S. pygmaea*). Further, this season has seen several vagrants from the west in Iowa, such as Varied Thrush, Black-billed Magpie and possibly Gray Jay (which is more likely to have come from the north and arrived in October). The almost steady influx of cold air from the north and northwest makes eastward displacement of an abundant western bird more plausible than northward displacement of a less common southeastern species. Short of a specimen, the record will retain an element of uncertainty. We prepared a detailed documentation sheet based on our observation of Feb. 19 accompanied by Allan Mueller and Mary Lou Petersen. However, there are those who believe that *S. pygmaea* and *S. pusilla* are conspecific and should be lumped (Mayr, E. and L. L. Short, Jr. *Species Taxa of North American Birds*, Publ. Nuttall Ornith. Club, No. 9, 1970), although the A.O.U. has not (yet?) accepted this point of view. P.P. and N.H.

S(-GQ

Pygmy Nuthatch

Halmi, N. S. 1977.  
Field reports  
Iowa Bird Life 47:56-63

Titmice through Thrushes. Des Moines' famous Boreal Chickadee was last seen on March 7 (WB). At RRR, Red-breasted Nuthatches stayed into April (GB); several were seen in IHIP May 4-5 (RD). The Pygmy Nuthatch left its haunt of many months in Des Moines on April 15 (WB). Brown Creepers have been at a premium: Petersen banded only 6 between March 29 and April 19. House Wrens arrived on a new early date, April 16 (TS, WB). Winter Wrens were "fairly com-

March 10, 1977

Norris, B. Letter to  
P. C. Petersen 1977

Dear Pete,

I looked over the photos of your nuthatch with considerable interest. Although my experience with nuthatches goes back many years (I'm now chiefly engaged in field botany!), I did study the pygmy and brown-headed species intensively in the early 1950s. I feel no doubt whatsoever that your bird is Sitta pygmaea - almost certainly S. p. melanotis as you indicate. The head color distinction is not as subtle as some might think. I enclose a kodachrome showing study skins of the two together (I'd appreciate your returning this). Notice the brownhead is slightly heavier-billed (this distinction is subtle, admittedly). The white areas in wing and tail tend to be more conspicuous in the pygmy; this is especially true of the tail (thus, I felt certain your bird was pygmaea even before seeing the slides). You are right in saying the pygmy is more of a wanderer; Frederick C. Lincoln once referred to this species as "a great tramp." I regret that I no longer have study skins or copies of my monograph to share with you. These comments are all informal and not intended for print, although you have permission to print any part of them, or to put into your own words the gist of what I've had to say. (over)

Sincere best wishes, Bob Norris

Nick-  
Norris  
Comments  
re  
Nuthatch  
copy  
sent  
to  
Vern 3/14  
P.C.

P.S. After four years of work and completion of a long MS on these nuthatches; I felt they were better considered specifically distinct. Of course some others, as Sutton, Mayr, and SHOT, as you've acknowledged, regard them as conspecific. I'm not sure any of these lumpers had the fortitude to read slowly and carefully my 180 page monograph!

documentation

81-GQ

Middlewestern Prairie Region  
(Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio)

BIRDS: VERIFYING DOCUMENTATION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SIGHT RECORD.

1. Species Pygmy Nuthatch 2. Number: 1
3. Location 5400 Woodland Ave. Des Moines, IOWA
4. Date: 2/19/77 5. Time Bird seen: 10:45 AM to 11:20 AM
6. Description of size, shape and color-pattern (describe in great detail all parts of the plumage, and beak and feet coloration, in addition, to the diagnostic characteristics, but include only what actually was seen in the field): Little smaller than Red-breasted Nuthatch seen nearby. Cap brownish-olive, with distinct black line through the eye. Back bluish-gray. Indistinct white spot on the nape. Wings and tail darker gray than back. White base of outer remiges. Underparts dirty whitish. Bill straight, as long as the head, black. Legs dark. Undertail coverts cleaner & white than breast.
7. Description of voice, if heard: matching tape from Western Peterson record (to which it responded vigorously)
8. Description of behavior: at suet and satellite feeder. Kept flying back into plum tree, where it foraged along trunk, probing the bark extensively
9. Habitat - general: suburban, old neighborhood  
specific: back yard of Dr. Lawrence Ely residence
10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8, Explain: Brown-headed Nuthatch. Head color too gray for *Sitta pusilla* p. Eye line too distinct. White spot on nape shown as better defined in field guides. Bird very tame. Weather conditions all winter more likely to cause eastward
11. Distance (how measured)? displacement of western bird. down to 6 ft. (by camera rangefinder) 12. Optical equipment: 7x35, 10x35, 8x30 binoculars
13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you): Sunny day. Varying with position, also right sun right behind observer at his choice
14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species: Three of 4 had seen both P. and Br-h. nuthatch in their respective normal ranges
15. Other observers: Peter C. Petersen, Marylou Petersen, Allen Mueller (color photos by PCP)
16. Did the others agree with your identification? Yes
17. Other observers who independently identified this bird: W. H. Brown, Margaret Brooke 1/25, Lillian Serbousek and 8 others (Cedar Rapids) 2/9
18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description: Standard field guides; Ridgway's Birds of N. and Middle America vol. IV, Smith's Color Guide, Oberholser's Birds of Texas. No influence on description, supported identification as Pygmy Nuthatch
19. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description? 2-2 1/2 hrs.
- Signature: W. H. Brown Address: R#6, Iowa City, IA 52240
- Date: 2/19/77 City, State: \_\_\_\_\_

(over)

Pigmy Nuthatch, Sitta pygmaea in Des Moines.

On 25 January, 1977, Mrs. Lawrence Ely at 5400 Woodland Ave called to say that a bird which was coming to her feeders fitted the description of the Pigmy Nuthatch. As she was aware that the species was unheard of in this area, she wished confirmation of the identification. After studying the various field guides, Margaret Brooke, Mary Brown and I were at the Ely residence at 9:15 the next morning.

After a 15 or 20 minute wait the nuthatch came to a window shelf feeding tray on the south side of the kitchen. With a bright and cloudless sky we watched the bird eating sunflower seeds after wedging them in a crack in the rim of the tray. The bird was within arm's reach as we were separated from the tray only by a counter top about two feet deep. It paid not the slightest attention to us and Bailey (Birds of Colo) comments upon their fearlessness.

According to plumage descriptions of the Pigmy and Brown-headed Nuthatches, the only noticeable difference between the two (short of having the bird in hand) is in the color of the crown and nape. The field guides are agreed that the crown of the Brown-headed is brown, but there is a lack of unanimity in their descriptions of the crown of the Pigmy. Peterson says "grayish-brown" with a faintly brownish cap in his illustration: Pough refers to a possible conspecific status with no reference to color, but his illustration shows gray; Robbins says "grayer than the Brown-headed" and shows gray in his picture. In Birds of America (Pearson, ed), the Pigmy is described as having a "light grayish olive or olive-gray cap".

Margaret Brooke, in writing up the observation for IBL, describes the cap as being "brownish" but has no doubt about this nuthatch being a Pigmy. Mary and I feel the grayish olive description comes closest and cinches the Pigmy identification.

We have seen the Pigmy Nuthatch on numerous trips to Colorado, and I also saw the Brown-headed in Louisiana on one occasion. On 27 January, I went back to the Ely residence with Gene and Mrs Armstrong of Booneville, and the bird was again well seen, this time on a feeder in a nearby tree. According to Mrs Ely, the nuthatch has been seen daily for "a couple of weeks."

Thos Gray & H Brown

28 Jan. 1977