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Stephen Barten DVM captured these images in the Barrington area.

Birds of Barrington:

WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH: THE UPSIDE-DOWN BIRD

In the deep winter months of January and February, there is little indication that migrants will begin to return to the Barrington area anytime soon. It's a good time to focus on a year-round resident that is also a regular visitor to feeders. One such species (and one that never fails to bring a smile to my face) is the White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*).

What is it about the nuthatch that delights? Is it the chunky figure seemingly without a neck? Is it the plumage that seems tuxedo-like? The head that looks cocked? The ever-so-slightly upturned bill? Or perhaps the nasal ank-ank-ank that the nuthatch emits as it shuffles up and down tree trunks?

The White-breasted Nuthatch always seems to me to be completely absorbed in its own world, oblivious to other birds that frequently associate with it, like the Black-capped Chickadee and Brown Creeper. Sometimes called the “upside-down bird” for its ability and propensity to head down a tree trunk as well as up, the nuthatch can be identified as easily by its form, size, and style of movement as by its field marks. No other bird is at

once so condensed in shape and jerky of motion, somewhat like a feathered wind-up toy.

But while it can superficially amuse, the White-breasted Nuthatch warrants serious observation. Because pairs tend to remain in the same area year-round, it is possible to follow their movements and behavior through the seasons. They begin courtship as early as February, much earlier than most species; from now through nesting season, you will not see a pair ever very far apart.

Tree holes are important to nuthatches. They roost in them at night and raise their broods in tree holes, often rotted knotholes of large trees. That behavior earns them the description of cavity nesters, a characteristic shared with chickadees and Downy Woodpeckers.

In late winter you may spot one White-breasted Nuthatch feeding another. That would be the male offering tidbits to his mate—a feature of nuthatch courtship. You may also hear them making short ip-ip calls to keep in contact. Once a nest hole has been chosen, the female alone collects bark, grasses, rootlets, and fur to line the cavity before

she lays a clutch of 5-10 eggs. She also assumes sole responsibility for incubating. Her mate will bring her food during that two-week period and while she broods the nestlings.

If you maintain bird feeders and notice White-breasted Nuthatches coming for suet or seeds, pay close attention to their crowns which are key to differentiating the sexes. The male's will be jet black, while the top of the female's head will be not so dark and sometimes has a silvery sheen. And watch for signs of courtship: mate-feeding and staying close to one another.



Whether hitching its way comically along a tree trunk or branch, making short flights within its compact territory, or nabbing seeds to cache in a tree trunk or feed a mate, the White-breasted Nuthatch is a species that offers plenty of interest for the backyard bird watcher. 🐦

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PHOTO: LINDA M. BARRETT
Wendy Paulson is a teacher and naturalist who has lived in the Barrington area for over 40 years. She revived the Nature Lady program in District 220 schools, started and directed the education program for Citizens for Conservation,

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