



Wyre Forest Study Group

OBSERVATIONS OF A CAMOUFLAGE POSTURE ADOPTED BY THE NUTHATCH (*Sitta europaea*)

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Those of us who photograph birds from a hide are rewarded with a privileged close up view of the lives and behaviour of our subjects not often seen by the bird watcher. On rare occasions unusual unrecorded behaviour is observed which unless published is not shared with others interested in the species.

Most people with an interest in natural history are familiar with the Nuthatch, one of the most acrobatic of our small resident forest birds. Both male and female are compact birds similar in size and shape. In general appearance the plumage of the male is blue grey on the back with predominantly warm buff underparts and chestnut flanks which extend beneath the tail where they appear and form a pattern as chestnut tips to the white undertail coverts. The female Nuthatch has a similar back coloration but has underparts a rather paler version of the male. The Nuthatch has a short tail, large feet with substantial claws and a long strong dagger shaped bill. These attributes equip it well for its mainly arboreal life where it is the only bird in the forest that is able to traverse head first downwards on the tree trunks with ease. The Nuthatch is a very vocal bird with a wide and varied repertoire of piping calls and makes its presence known as soon as the observer enters its territory.

In winter a strategically placed hide in the forest at a baited site may be visited on a regular basis by a foraging winter flock of small birds. At this time of year the flock may be made up of tits of all species, Treecreepers, Nuthatches, Robins, Wrens and Finches. Thirty or more years ago a winter flock might contain three hundred birds. Sadly present day numbers are unlikely to exceed fifty. Once the hide and its occupant have been accepted as part of the forest it is ignored and I have even had Robins from a flock come inside the hide with me to look for food. When the forest is quiet an approaching flock can be heard some distance away. The murmuring of wings and the incessant subdued chirping contact calls herald its arrival. Suddenly the area around the hide, which perhaps has only had a Great Spotted Woodpecker in view is thronged with birds. The flock sweeps through foraging among the crevices in the bark of the trees and on the ground and those birds that choose to feed from the baited perches can be photographed in the usual manner. In the matter of a few minutes the flock sweeps past and may not return for hours. On 12th November 1972 at 2.45pm I was

occupying a hide which was sited on a bank high above Dowles Brook in Wyre Forest. I had already spent some hours in the hide and was at the time surrounded by a winter flock of birds. Suddenly there was a commotion and the contact calls of the flock ceased and the forest rang with the alarm calls of birds far and near. I was able to locate the cause of the alarm for coming towards the hide dodging in and out of the trees was a hen Sparrowhawk in hot pursuit of a Nuthatch. Sparrowhawks are tenacious pursuers and in my experience rarely fail to catch their intended prey no matter what obstacles hinder them. Twenty feet in front of the hide the Nuthatch suddenly dived downwards and made a U turn around an oak tree. A male bird it landed upside down at the base of the tree with its beak against the bark and its tail protruding out away from the tree at 60 degrees to the trunk. With the Nuthatch in this position the view from above would only show the buff and chestnut underparts and the bird would be well camouflaged against the similar colours of the masses of fallen oak leaves. The Sparrowhawk overshot the tree where the Nuthatch had lodged and went out of my range of view. Judging by the continued commotion from Jays and Great Spotted Woodpeckers it was perched somewhere nearby. The Nuthatch remained frozen motionless for several minutes. For such an active bird to be able to make this sudden transition into what appeared a trance like state surprised me. During this period of time the local alarm calls died away and were taken up by others further away in the forest as the Sparrowhawk having lost sight of its intended prey continued its hunt elsewhere. The Nuthatch slowly turned its head to one side to look around and being satisfied that all was now safe flew rapidly away. I recorded this lucky observation to share it with other bird enthusiasts by publishing a note in the "British Birds" magazine in 1973.

Having seen what I have described as "camouflage posture" once, I wondered of course whether this was a normal piece of Nuthatch species behaviour or whether it was the panic reaction of an individual bird. Consequently whenever I observed Nuthatches from then on I looked to see if this behaviour would be repeated. Twenty years were to pass before I was lucky enough to observe a Nuthatch in a stressful situation where it displayed "camouflage posture" again. This time the observation was under very different circumstances to my first encounter.

On 11th May 1993 at 4.00pm I was using my car as a hide in Wyre Forest near to Dowles Brook. I was

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positioned close to a Nuthatch nest where both parents were feeding the young. The nest was situated fifteen feet or so above the ground in an abandoned woodpecker hole which had been excavated in a substantial oak tree. The scene around me was idyllic with the sound of running water mingling with the songs of Redstarts, Wood Warblers, Willow Warblers and a Pied Flycatcher not far away. The Woodpecker hole was of course well plastered up with mud in the usual Nuthatch fashion reducing its size to exclude predators. Suddenly a Pied Flycatcher alighted beneath the Nuthatch nest hole and poked its head inside. The response from the male Nuthatch was immediate with loud alarm calls as it flew in to attack the Pied Flycatcher. There followed what can only be described as an extraordinary high speed aerial pursuit up and down and around the nest tree. First the Nuthatch pursued the Pied Flycatcher then the roles were reversed and the Pied Flycatcher pursued the Nuthatch. On occasions the Pied Flycatcher would attempt to land at the nest hole

only to be driven off by the Nuthatch. During this frantic activity I was unable to see where the female Nuthatch was or what she was doing. After numerous circuits of the nest tree the Pied Flycatcher appeared to become the more aggressive of the two birds. The Nuthatch suddenly dived down to the base of the tree and froze motionless upside down in the "camouflage posture" above fallen oak leaves exactly as I had observed before. The Pied Flycatcher immediately lost interest in the chase and flew directly to the Nuthatches' nest hole where it easily negotiated the reduced diameter hole and entered the nest. A few seconds later it emerged and flew away into the distance. After about twenty seconds the Nuthatch turned its head, looked around and then flew up to and entered its nest. It spent perhaps half a minute inside then left the nest and flew away calling as it went. A few minutes later both male and female Nuthatches were back feeding their young as if nothing had happened. For the time being tranquillity was restored to that little piece of the forest.

Nuthatch



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