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Winter 2003

Issue 50

Burlington Recreation and Parks

### ANIMAL CLOSE-UP

(a close-up view of a mammal, bird, or other creature found in North Carolina)

#### WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH

(*Sitta carolinensis*)

Nuthatches are adorable little birds, most easily recognized, not by their coloration, but by their interesting ability of moving headfirst down trees, often making a distinguished, somewhat nasally, sound. At a glance, the coloration looks something like a chickadee, but the shape, sound, and movement are completely different than that of a Carolina or black-capped. White-breasted nuthatches have a plain white underside, black crown and nape, and white face.

Courtship for nuthatches begins in late winter, much earlier than for most birds. On a cold January morning, sometimes at the crack of dawn, you may hear the male nuthatch do his courtship concert. He will perch at the top of a tree, sing his song (loudly), and bow his body down with each note.

Courtship develops into "mate-feeding." The male collects a piece of food, often from one of his caches, and delivers it to the female. He then places the food in her beak. This mate-feeding behavior continues into April.

Nuthatch pairs remain together in the same vicinity throughout the year. Depending on the season,

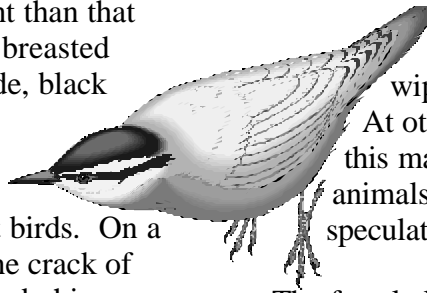
they may have little to do with each other. At other times (through courtship, mating, and breeding), they are almost continually together.

Nuthatches store food in bark crevices of trees. They nest in tree cavities, often where a knothole has rotted out. They may have to compete with other wildlife for these nesting sites. Nuthatches roost in a tree hole during the winter.

The nest is typically built by the female. One curious behavior that has been noted are the birds sweeping their beaks back and forth on the bark near the nesting hole. It can continue for ten minutes or more and for several days in a row. Sometimes the birds are wiping off crushed insects from their bill. At other times, bits of fur. Scientists believe this marks the nesting site to deter other animals from taking over, but it is only speculation.

The female lays 5-10 eggs, white with light brown dots concentrated at the larger end of the egg. The eggs are incubated by the female for about 12 days after the final egg is laid. The female occasionally leaves the nest to feed with the male, but primarily is fed by him on the nest.

Like most songbirds, the newly hatched are brooded the first few days by the female. The male brings food, not only to his mate, but the young as well. After the brooding is over, both gather food for the babies and both remove the fecal sacs the youngsters endlessly produce! The babies stay in



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the nest about 2 weeks. The young continue to receive food from the parents for another two weeks after leaving the nest, but the family remains together as a unit much longer than that.

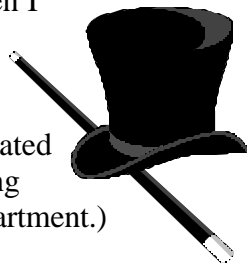
Males and females are colored nearly identical. A trained eye can tell the male from the female by observing the dark patch at the top of the head. On the male, the patch is jet black. On the female, it is lighter and has a silver sheen to it.

Most nuthatches are year-round residents in the area where they breed. They are fun birds to watch and listen to. They will sometimes use nesting boxes if they are built to the correct dimensions and mounted at least 15 feet in a tree in a woodland setting.

Their natural preferred foods are insects and the nuts of deciduous trees. They will also eat waste grains, and the seeds and berries of other plants. They are frequent visitors to bird feeders, enjoying suet, sunflower seeds, and other treats.

## HATS OFF TO OUR NEW BOSS

After many years as Director of the Recreation and Parks Department, Harold Owen has been promoted to City Manager. Tony Laws is the new Recreation and Parks Director. He has been with the Rec. Department since 1969! Congratulations, Tony. And congratulations, Harold, on your promotion as well. We appreciate all you did for us over the years. (Back in 1989 when I approached Mr. Owen about doing Nature News and later some nature programs, he gave me the green light. I have always appreciated him giving me a chance and helping bring more nature to the Rec. Department.)



## HOW RIDICULOUS IS THAT?

As writer and editor of Nature News (and a plain, ol' animal lover as well), I am constantly looking through wildlife and pet catalogs to see what the latest in critter gadgets is. Sometimes the things for sale go beyond silly and venture into the downright ridiculous. Here is an example.

I just saw an advertisement for a bat house (I have a bat house and highly recommend them as I think bats are quite misunderstood). But THIS bat house has a removable cover which allows you to see the bats. Now, first of all, for a bat house to be effective, it has to be hung REALLY HIGH in a tree. So exactly how feasible is it for someone to get out a big ladder, drag it over to the tree, climb up, remove the panel and look inside? Okay, then ask yourself how likely is it that the bats are just going to stay inside this house while all this noise and shaking of the tree is going on? How safe is it to be that high on said ladder and suddenly the bats get spooked and start flying out? Your natural reaction is going to be to jump back, right? And if you get bitten by one of these scared, frightened bats? Then you have to go through a series of rabies shots because you will have no way of knowing WHICH bat bit you, and even if you could point out the culprit, how would you catch him? And last but certainly not least, if it is cold weather and the bats are hibernating, doing anything to disturb them will use up fat reserves. They could starve to death if they run out of stored energy before they run out of cold weather!



I am just dumbfounded over “inventions” like this. If you would like to send me more examples of really silly animal products, please do so and I may publish them in a future issue. In the meantime, if you want to buy a bat house, just purchase the regular kind that doesn't require you to be Spider-man to use!

## CLOTH BAGS

I got a call recently from Mary M. wanting to know where she could purchase the cloth bags I have mentioned in previous newsletters. I carry two types of bags for shopping - a string bag that wads up and fits in my pocketbook, and canvas bags for groceries. Each bag has its advantages and disadvantages. The string bags are very compact and will fit in your pocketbook, or pocket for that matter. They stretch like crazy and hold lots of things. The problem is they won't hold anything small because it will fall right through the holes! So it depends on what you're shopping for. (Of course you can put small items in your purse... after you pay for them, of course!) The canvas

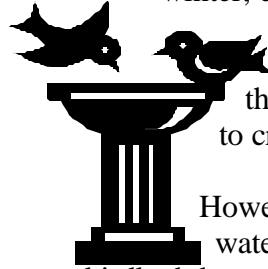


bags are very strong, sturdy, and hold a lot as well. They do not, however, fit in your pocketbook! What I do is carry 8 or 10 of them (depending on how many groceries we need). I fold and put them all inside one bag, then carry the outer bag like a tote. When it comes time to bag my groceries, I dump out all the bags and fill them. They hold a lot more than those plastic bags and are much easier to carry than paper bags.

Anyway, as to where you can purchase them. Most of your environmental catalogs carry them, such as Real Goods and Seventh Generation. You can also buy canvas bags at most t-shirt print shops. Tell them you are interested in plain, unprinted canvas bags. There is a company called Northern Sun that sells bags as well. They sell some outrageous (and some may consider them offensive) t-shirts, but their tote bags are the best price I've seen. Their web address is: [www.northernsun.com](http://www.northernsun.com) The item number is #2031 and they are \$6.00 each. However, if you order four, the price drops to \$5.00 each, and if you buy ten it drops down to a mere four bucks each! So, Mary M., I hope this helps you find what you're looking for. And I hope this will encourage the rest of you to carry your own bags to the grocery store. Next time they ask "paper or plastic?" you can smile and say "neither, thank you. I care about my planet."

## DO DRINK THE WATER

After the drought we experienced this summer, I think all of us are more acutely aware of the importance of water. Yet many folks, in the winter, drain their birdbaths and turn them upside down to keep them from filling up with rain. The reason is they don't want freezing temperatures to crack them.



However, birds and other wildlife need water during the winter. They make birdbath heaters that keep the water above freezing (but not warm). These devices are safe for people and wildlife and allow critters to drink their fill on frigid days when other water sources are iced over.

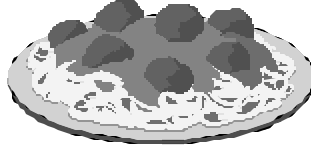
## A GOOD READ

There are a lot of magazines out there. Some are great, others are a waste of good trees. I recently came across one called "Mother Jones" that really grabbed my attention. The January/February issue, my first, is packed full of gritty, no-holds-barred stories about Superfund sites being cut from the budget; the overwhelming amount of chemicals used on roses grown in Ecuador, then sold in the United States. There is a fascinating article about "Care-A-Vanners" who travel the country to work on Habitat for Humanity sites. One article covers school lunches and how they can contribute to childhood obesity...and lots more. I can't wait to see what's in the March/April edition! If you would like to subscribe, you can do so on-line at: [www.motherjones.com](http://www.motherjones.com)



## CLEAN THAT PLATE!

Remember growing up how mom would tell you to clean your plate, that there were starving children in other countries who would love to have that food? Well, apparently her advice has gone unheeded. Every year, Americans throw away 96 billion pounds of food. 96 BILLION pounds!



## WORD SEARCH

Below you can find some of the wild animals that are in our area of North Carolina. They can run left to right, right to left, up, down, or diagonally. See if you can find them all.



**Mole, opossum, squirrel, rabbit, mouse, snake, robin, skunk, duck, goose, owl, deer, wren, bat, and toad.**

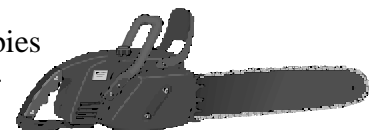


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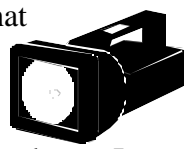
## LOOK BEFORE YOU SAW

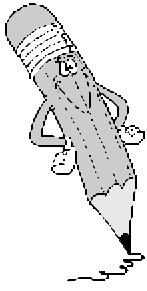
Most folks think wild babies are born in the spring, beginning about April. But in our state, babies begin in January (black bears and great horned owls) and February (squirrels - flying, gray, etc.) So before you cut down a tree thinking this is a safe time of year, make certain it isn't a nursery for some tiny creature. Be especially careful of any hollowed out areas in the tree that are hard to see from the ground. Try using binoculars to find any suspect areas and, if you hire a tree service, ask if they check for nests BEFORE they cut. (Some tree services see wildlife as disposable as tissues. Others do not intentionally orphan babies, but also don't go to any trouble looking first. And still others try to make sure the trees are free and clear of inhabitants and, if they make a mistake, help contact a wildlife hospital to help. Be sure, in advance, who you are dealing with.)



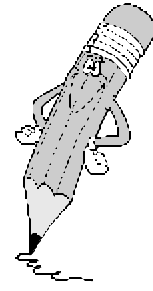
## DON'T WATER AT NIGHT

I am sure I've read somewhere that watering your outdoor plants after dark is not a good idea for the plants' sake, but I now know it is a bad idea for another reason. One night recently I realized I had forgotten to water my hanging baskets that day, so proceeded to do so then and there. Much to my horror, I not only frightened a Carolina wren roosting for the night, but dumped water on his head to boot. I felt terrible scaring him like that, getting him wet on a cold night, and taking away his warm bed. You won't catch me watering my plants at night any more.





# Kids' Page



You may have heard some of the adults in your life talking about New Year's resolutions. Maybe an aunt or uncle plans to lose weight or a parent intends to quit smoking. But resolutions aren't just for adults. Kids can make resolutions for the new year as well. Perhaps you want to try harder this year to organize your day so you will have more time for playing (after you finish your homework, of course). Or maybe you'd like to keep your room cleaner (hey, it's a thought). Think about some of the resolutions you want to make this year. List four below:

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Now, can you think of some resolutions you might make that would be good for the animals of our world or our environment? Maybe you can make a pact that you will use a lot less water or that you will build a brush pile on your property for wildlife to hide in. List four resolutions below that will help our planet and the animals that live on it.

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Do you think you will have a hard time keeping your resolutions? What are some reasons you think it might be tough to accomplish? Good luck on keeping your pact!

My young friends, Doug (age 13 ) and Juli (age 11 ) both made resolutions. Doug is determined to get in shape, read more, and finish writing a book he is authoring. Juli resolves to get the best grades she can (keep in mind, she's already an A student!)



## HONORING AN ANGEL-PET

When you lose a pet, the grief can be overwhelming. For many of us, our pets are our children and losing them is losing a member of the family. There is no right or wrong way to deal with your grief.

If you are a friend of someone who has lost a pet, it is important that you do not fluff it off with “oh, you can always get another pet” or “goodness, you’re acting like you’ve lost a child.” You should respect their grief, even if you, yourself, are not comfortable with it. Minimizing their pain won’t make their pain any less. All it will do is make the grieving person feel misunderstood and alienated.

Some ways to show you care are to send a simple card. While there are greeting cards exactly for that purpose, it does not have to specifically be a pet sympathy card. You can write a short note on a blank card and it will mean just as much. Try to avoid phrases like “it was their time” or “I’m sure you will find another pet to fill the void.” If you don’t know what to say, say that. “I don’t know what to say to make you feel better, but I am so sorry for your loss” is enough. After all, there really IS nothing you can say to make the person feel better, but it makes them happy to know you care.

Honoring a deceased pet can be done in many ways. You can adopt a tree in the pet’s memory. (Contact the Burlington Recreation and Parks Department for information on our adopt-a-tree program.) You can send a donation to a local animal group (for example, in this area, the Humane Society of Alamance County, P. O. Box 3673, Burlington, NC 27215 or Kindred Spirits Wildlife Center, P. O. Box 1222, Graham, NC 27253. Both organizations send out a card acknowledging your gift.) You can have a “faux pawz” sent to the person. These gorgeous stained glass pieces can be personalized with the deceased pet’s name. (Find out more by e-mailing artist Cheryl Knox of White Light Studio at: [purrple@webtv.net](mailto:purrple@webtv.net))

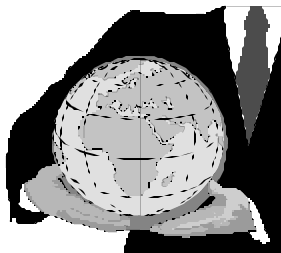
My husband and I have a different personalized ornament made for our Christmas tree for each dog that has graced our lives and had to leave us for the angels. Over the past 23 years, our tree has added ornaments for Bryan, Beth, Bonnie, Bill, and Sue-Z (our only non-“B” dog, long story) and someday, we hope a long time in the future, there will be ones for Barney, Briana, Brennan, Bart, and Bailey.

Regardless of how one commemorates the passing of a special pet, the real testament is the memorial left in our heart.

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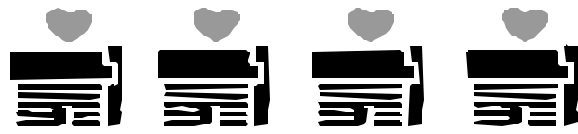
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about the individual, you can’t help but care about the bigger picture. After all, it is the individuals who make up the bigger picture. Without the individuals, there IS no bigger picture. So while there are those out there who think our life’s work is a waste of time, we know differently. And



whether there will ever be enough caring people to save this planet or not, I have to believe that, in the end, it matters that we tried.

With country wishes for a blessed new year,



## MUSINGS FROM THE COUNTRY

This is the time of year I use “Musings” to talk about a few of the animals I have cared for over the past 12 months. This year has really been a tough one for lots of reasons. With the new regulation now making it illegal to help a sick, injured, or orphaned deer added on top of laws passed several years ago making it illegal to help raccoons, skunks, foxes, and bats, I am trying to make sense out of the senseless. In chatting with a person who oversees my work (they don’t pay me, but I nonetheless have supervisors), he tells me that rehabilitation is wrong anyway, that any animal that finds itself in need of help should either be left for “nature to take its course” or humanely euthanized. Because rehabilitation does not affect the overall health of a species, there is no sense in doing it, he claims. The fact that 99% of the animals that come to our hospital are because of humans, not “nature“ doesn’t matter, he says.

I have given up 12 years (and counting!) of my and my husband’s life doing a job that this man (and some others) believe is a waste of time. Have I made a difference in the overall population of even one species of wildlife? Not likely. But have we made a difference? You’re darn right. We made a difference to Billy Bear, the cub that came to us this summer. Billy should have weighed 60 pounds given his age. An obvious orphan, this skeletal fella weighed in at a mere 20 pounds. He had lost the mother who would show him where and how to find food, and was dying because she did not live long enough to teach him those lessons. Billy, desperately in search of something to fill his painfully empty belly, wandered out in the road and was hit by a car. As a result, he suffered severe brain damage. When he came to us three days later, Billy could not stand up. He crawled in

circles and, if he tried to get up, fell over. If you put a bowl of warm formula in front of him, his severe hunger kicked in, but he could not hold his head up. He would lay his head sideways in the bowl and slurp to the best of his ability. We had to give him only a small amount of formula at a time to keep him from drowning in the very food he needed to survive! We feared his brain injuries would be permanent. Today, however, he is a whopping 100 pounds. His dirty matted fur has been replaced by shiny black hair. He can climb trees with nary a sign of the brain and nerve damage that plagued his tiny body.

We made a difference to Lanie, the fawn who lay starving in a field when her mother was killed. A woman heard the little deer crying for hours and went in search of her. Near death from dehydration and starvation, the little female willing allowed herself to be picked up and carried to our hospital where she slowly, but surely, grew strong on the rich formula we fed her. She was released into the wild this fall.

We made a difference to Knox, Troxler, Holt, and Pomer, four newborn squirrels whose tree was cut down. Squirrels are good mothers but are defenseless against a chainsaw. The earth shook when the tree that housed them went crashing to the ground, babies and all. The four survived the accident, but without our assistance, would have died of exposure before the late winter day was over.

We have taught children and adults about wildlife, taught them to care. And they will teach their friends and family and children. When you care

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