

Unusual Food-caching Site for a Red-breasted Nuthatch

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THE RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH (*Sitta canadensis*) is a short-term cacher, hiding as many as 150 items a day in a pattern that suggests much of the food may be retrieved later the same day (Grubb and Waite 1987). Food is typically cached in tree bark crevices, but occasionally in the ground (Hendricks 1995). Less than half of caches are covered, with bark or other material picked up within reach of the cache site.

I recently observed caching in an unusual location. On 1 September 2012, I was sitting quietly, alone, on a second-storey deck in Simcoe, Ontario (42.83° N, 80.30° W). Several Red-breasted Nuthatches were visiting a feeder about 3 m away that was filled with black oil sunflower seeds, and carrying seeds to a tree about 5 m away. Judging by the

frequency of visits and rapidity of return from the tree, the birds were caching seeds rather than opening and eating them.

One nuthatch carried a seed to the empty seat of the chair next to me, took a few hops while looking from side to side, then hopped to the deck by my feet. It briefly investigated several crevices, then jumped onto the toe of one of my sandals and tucked the seed under my socked foot (Figure 1). The bird made no attempt to cover the seed, and flew off directly without any sign of having been startled.

The seed was pushed in about 1 cm under my foot, similar to the 1.5 cm Hendricks (1995) reported for a seed cached in the ground. There was no material close at hand for use in covering the



Figure 1. Location (indicated by arrow) where Red-breasted Nuthatch cached a sunflower seed.
Photo: Erica Dunn.

cache (Figure 1), but in any event the seed was not visible after it was deposited.

I searched The Birds of North America (<http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/>) for caching behaviour in passerines, and found no records of caching in artificial sites, let alone on humans. Dr. David Sherry, a student of caching behaviour (e.g. Sherry 1985), confirmed the novelty of this incident. Other than demonstrating behavioural flexibility, however, the event I experienced is of little biological significance, however delightful it may have been.

Literature Cited

- Grubb, T.C. and T.A. Waite.** 1987. Food caching in Red-breasted Nuthatch. *Wilson Bulletin* 99:699 – 704.
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