



The View From Heifer Hill—October 2022

An Alliance of Nuthatches



I HAVE BEEN MANY THINGS to many creatures, but for the past few weeks I have had a new role—the “nuclear species” of a mixed foraging flock. One afternoon, while I was hard at work in my outdoor office, I felt the vibrations of someone landing on the ropes of my hammock— someone very small. Because I was wearing my sunhat, I couldn't see who it was, but I recognized the distinctive nasal call of a red-breasted nuthatch.

Those of you who know these natty little birds know that they don't form flocks. A flock of nuthatches? That would be lovely but weird. Nuthatches, if they are lucky enough to have a mate and a good territory, will stay together and stay put year-round. What is not weird is to find a nuthatch or two among a flock of chickadees. You could even throw in a few tufted titmice, kinglets, and downy woodpeckers—a mixed foraging flock— and that would be well within the realm of what birdwatchers expect.

All of these birds occupy a similar niche; they feed predominately on insects concealed in the nooks and crannies of trees, but they are happy to take advantage of seeds as well. Why would it behoove a nuthatch to join such a flock on oc-

casion? Research has verified the reasons you might have guessed. It turns out that a flock is better at finding food than a single bird. What's more, when a chickadee stirs up a hidden insect, the nuthatch has a chance to nab it. There is also safety in numbers. If a predator happens by, there will be more eyes to spot it, and yes, if a predator happens by, a bird's chance of being the target becomes smaller as the flock becomes larger. The downsides of joining a flock are similarly obvious. A predator is more likely to notice a noisy group than a single bird, and the food discovered must feed many mouths. The opportunistic strategy of the nuthatches, joining flocks but not forming them, seems to serve them well.

Because nuthatches are primed to forage in mixed groups, I suspect that they are less wary of strangers and more inclined to seek alliances. Many people have stories of close encounters with nuthatches. My favorite comes from Skip Lisle. A nuthatch accompanied him for two days while he installed a beaver deceiver in a remote area in Maine. The little bird followed him, honking companionably as he worked. I think the nuthatch believed they were a mixed foraging flock of two. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if the nuthatch

was lonely and took some avian pleasure from the company. I know Skip did.

In these mixed foraging flocks, the species that attracts the other birds and provides the group cohesion is the “nuclear species” — mostly chickadees here in the Northeast. I didn’t look a bit like a flock of chickadees while working in my hammock that day. Did the nuthatch associate my recumbent form with the upright one that puts out seeds in the cold months? I got some sunflower seeds. I put them on my hat. I kept working. You know the rest of the story.

Now, whenever I head outside, I am reminded of my new role by the buzz of nuthatch wings and excited nasal twitterings. I have learned to keep a pocketful of sunflower seeds. The nuthatch and her mate swoop in, perch on my hand, and sort through the seeds, discarding until they find one that is heavy enough. Then

they fly off a short distance and look for a place to hide it, usually in a nook or cranny in a nearby tree. For my share of the rewards, I am learning more about these little avian extroverts.

As I reach the end of this column, I recognize the conceit of calling myself the nuclear species of a this little flock. I’m not very alert to predators and I am pathetic, PATHETIC, as a forager among the nooks and crannies of trees. I’ll bet the nuthatches are smart enough to know that I offer a different set of advantages. Animated Dispenser of Grub (ADOG) might be more accurate. You can become an ADOG too. It’s easy. Put your hammock in place where nuthatches might be foraging. Chairs work too. Wear a wide-brimmed hat and put some seeds on it. Enjoy a book or maybe get some work done. It might take the nuthatches a while to discover you, but once they do, an enduring alliance will be forged.

