

Brown-headed Nuthatch

Accepted 6-1 to the Hypothetical List

This was easily the most difficult record to evaluate for the committee. There were many varying opinions expressed throughout the multiple rounds of voting. More than anything, the WVBRC wants its decisions to be correct. In this case, it is simply impossible to know. The By-laws are clear in what needs to be present for acceptance onto the official State List. Here, any such evidence was either not present or lost to time. This is one of the reasons the WVBRC has a Hypothetical List for which it keeps records. The initial observer was a very prominent and well-respected historical ornithologist whose reputation was not marred by any impropriety or scandal. The record was also published in a journal of repute for that time period. All of these factors came to bear on the WVBRC decision. Furthermore, in addition to acknowledging this sighting on the Hypothetical List, the WVBRC extends a sincere thanks to Casey Rucker for his great efforts in bringing this record to light.

Committee Member Comments:

CM1: No description really beyond a casual mention by a single person.

CM2: I originally voted against this record. However, after reconsideration, I am changing my vote to add this species to the Hypothetical List. It is clear that there are extralimital records of Brown-headed Nuthatch in the northeastern part of the country. However, in order to add the species to the West Virginia checklist, there must be sufficient and proper documentation, which is lacking here. Despite the fact that George Sutton was a well-known and respected ornithologist, I do not believe his brief anecdote of seeing a pair of Brown-headed Nuthatches in Brooke County is adequate to add the species to the state list. In a 28 page article, he devotes just one paragraph to seeing a pair that may or may not be breeding. There is no description or any other documentation to prove the sighting or to rule out similar species. He apparently made no record of the report, other than this article, to any state records committee or other organization that may have been in existence at that time.

CM3: I think that historical records like this are the most difficult to judge. Certainly, in this case, the observer's expertise should not be questioned, for the time period. Nevertheless, so much has been learned in terms of field ornithology in the ensuing century from this sighting that it makes evaluation difficult. Similar records from talented birders of this time have been dismissed as possible Red-breasted Nuthatch misidentification. And there is not much of report to evaluate. I am inclined to give Sutton the benefit of the doubt on this mark. However, I don't think full State List acceptance can be allowed here. The potential for error exists, there is no physical evidence, and there are no documented other observers. Furthermore precedent exists

for this action (Clapper Rail, Baird's Sparrow, Canyon Towhee, et al.). Thus, out of deference for Sutton and his contributions, at best I can vote for HYPOTHETICAL status.

CM4: I believe this record is valid by a well-respected individual. Bylaws would dictate that this record qualifies as a hypothetical record.

CM5: I have read the comments from the other members and understand the reasons for the discrepancy in votes. I vote to include the Brown-headed Nuthatch on the HYPOTHETICAL LIST. I agree with this statement from a member, "The potential for error exists, there is no physical evidence, and there are no documented other observers. Furthermore precedent exists for this action (Clapper Rail, Baird's Sparrow, Canyon Towhee, et al.). Thus, out of deference for Sutton and his contributions, at best I can vote for HYPOTHETICAL status." Also, I agree with the member who said, "... on the reputation of Sutton alone I am willing to elevate my vote for the hypothetical list." I would add the reputation of Casey Rucker who submitted the record is valued and a consideration of mine. The report form documents an annotated record by G.M. Sutton from 1920. Sutton was well-respected in the field of ornithology. The by-laws of the WVRBC do not address this type of submission directly. Since it was documented in a respected publication, the record deserves to be on the Hypothetical List for WV.

CM6: For me, this lone sighting 100 years ago does not meet the criteria to be included on the State List.

CM7: I am still torn on how to handle this record. George Sutton's reputation is the only reason to vote for the record. There have been other records of Brown-headed Nuthatches showing up outside of their usual range. However, the historic records in other states are generally very old and not in the breeding season. There is no description of the birds, habitat, how long he saw them or any other details. This species is obligate to pine trees and a note of finding them in pines would help to verify the record, but unfortunately we have no such information. The only thing we have is George's reputation and three other breeding season records outside of their usual range in NJ, IL and NY indicating that it is possible for them to be out of the typical range. What evidence do we have that these birds aren't Pygmy Nuthatches that were blown east instead of Brown-headed Nuthatches blown north? I originally voted for the Hypothetical List based on George Sutton's reputation alone. We still have no supporting evidence but we do have information that the species has occasionally been seen out of its usual range during the breeding season on three occasions. Three occasions is pretty weak support given the legion of birdwatching hours that have been logged in this region of North America over the past century. Therefore, my vote stands for the Hypothetical List.