

# Brown-headed Nuthatch Enhancement Study

Mark Stanback

Davidson College

## Objectives:

1. Assess the importance of pine density and competition with eastern bluebirds on the spatial distribution of brown-headed nuthatch nests.
2. Assess the numerical response of brown-headed nuthatches to the experimental exclusion of eastern bluebirds.
3. Assess the ability of eastern bluebirds to usurp nest sites from brown-headed nuthatches.
4. Provide golf course managers in the Southeast with recommendations to increase the numbers of brown-headed nuthatches on their golf courses.

**Start Date:** 2007

**Project Duration:** two years

**Total Funding:** \$7,400

The brown-headed nuthatch (*Sitta pusilla*) is a cooperatively breeding bird endemic to the southeastern United States. But for nearly half a century its numbers have been in decline. Habitat degradation is usually blamed. Brown-headed nuthatches are said to be habitat specialists - dependent on old growth pine forests. As development overtakes more of the Southeast, there are fewer old pine stands usable by these birds.

Another cavity-nesting species has increased dramatically in number in the same region - the Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*). Bluebirds tend to fare well in a variety of human-altered habitats. Moreover, bluebirds have been the beneficiaries of nest box programs throughout their range. We hypothesized that the burgeoning bluebird population in the Southeast is negatively impacting brown-headed nuthatches.

My students and I have been monitoring nest boxes on six golf courses near Davidson, North Carolina since 2001. For each nest box, we measured the distance to the nearest three pine trees (*Pinus echinata*). The distance to the third was our measure of pine density. Boxes for



1.5" entrance holes (left) accommodate both bluebirds and nuthatches; smaller holes (right) exclude the larger bluebirds.

which the third closest pine was less than 50 meters away were considered to be in "pine-rich" habitat; boxes for which the third closest pine was > 50 meters away were considered to be in "pine-poor" habitat.

Standard 1.5" entrance holes accommodate both bluebirds and nuthatches; 1.25" holes accommodate nuthatches, but are too small for bluebirds. We randomly assigned boxes on three golf courses to the 1.25" treatment. Pine density had no significant effect on nesting by nuthatches, contrary to the predictions of the conventional wisdom. Hole size, however, had a highly significant effect on nuthatch settlement: nuthatches settle where competition with bluebirds is minimized, regardless of local pine density.

We recorded the number of nuthatch nests on three courses with a subset of 1.25" entrance holes vs. the number on three other courses on which all boxes had standard "bluebird-friendly" 1.5" entrance holes. We monitored boxes in 2004 (prior to the addition of "nuthatch-friendly" holes on our experimental courses) to ensure that all six courses were similar in their lack of nuthatches. For the 2005, 2006, and 2007 breeding season, we monitored the numbers of nuthatch nests on both experimental and control courses. Numbers of nuthatches increased in each year of the study, suggesting that bluebirds competitively exclude nuthatches from available habitat.

These results clearly demonstrate that nuthatches flourish only where bluebirds are excluded. Prior to the 2008 breeding season, we reversed the treatments on our six golf courses: our three "bluebird-friendly" courses became "nuthatch-friendly" and vice-versa. Of the 32 boxes containing nuthatch nests in 2007, 31 contained bluebird nests in 2008. The competitive superiority of bluebirds is unquestionable.



Brown-headed nuthatches breed in cooperative groups in the southeastern US. (photo by Austin Mercadante)

## Summary Points

- Brown-headed nuthatch numbers have declined throughout the Southeast. Their supposed dependence on old growth pine forests - and susceptibility to habitat alteration - is usually blamed for this decline. We offer an alternative hypothesis - that nest site competition with a burgeoning eastern bluebird population is responsible.
- We monitored nest box use by bluebirds and nuthatches on golf courses and found that pine density had little effect on nest box use by nuthatches. Instead, the exclusion of bluebirds (via smaller entrance holes) was the best predictor of nest box occupation by nuthatches.
- Brown-headed nuthatch numbers increased dramatically on three golf courses where bluebirds were excluded from one-third of nest boxes. Control courses had few, if any, breeding nuthatches over the same period.
- When bluebird-friendly holes were returned to experimental boxes, bluebirds quickly evicted resident nuthatches.
- To prevent monopolization of nest boxes by bluebirds, golf courses in the Southeast should provide smaller entrance holes on a subset of their nest boxes.