

FIRST CLARK'S NUTCRACKER (*NUFRAGA COLUMBIANA*) FOR ALABAMA

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On 19 April 2002, while camping at Cheaha State Park, Clay Co., Alabama, Roger and Gretchen Johnson from Wisconsin discovered a Clark's Nutcracker (*Nufraga columbiana*). They realized this was a highly unlikely bird to see in Alabama. They had no idea whom they could notify and were unable to locate a contact source until they returned to Wisconsin. Fortunately, Gretchen logged on to her computer and found Alabama's Rare Bird Alert number and consequently reached Steve McConnell. Her description was so credible that McConnell immediately got the good news out to as many birders as he could contact.

The following day, 26 April, my husband Al Miller, Harriett Wright, and I arrived at Cheaha State Park at about 11 a.m. Enduring inclement weather, we searched intensely for about three hours in the general area of the campsite where the bird had first been seen by the Johnsons. We decided to check that spot one more time and then give up. Eureka! The last time was a charm because out walked the nutcracker from behind a garbage can not more than 20 feet (6 m) from where we were standing.

Clark's Nutcracker is a sturdy medium gray bird about the size of a Northern Flicker (Figure 1, See Cover). White patches on the secondaries stand out against the bird's glossy black wings. These patches and the white tail with black central feathers are very noticeable when the bird flies. The long, heavy, pointed bill and legs are black.

This noisy, gregarious bird occurs mainly in the mountains of southern Canada and western United States. The nutcracker does have a propensity to wander and is considered casual or accidental east to Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, western Ontario, Pennsylvania, Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas (*Check-list of North American Birds*, 7th edition, 1998). To the best of my knowledge, however, there are no records for the southeastern states east of the Mississippi River.

In spite of miserable weather at times, most of the birders who traveled to Cheaha State Park, were rewarded for their persistence. The nutcracker was very cooperative and was faithful to the area where it was first found. It was observed eating broken hickory nuts, new growth on deciduous trees, insects, and pine seeds (said to be a favorite). Also, peanuts furnished by many birders

were readily accepted. After all, this bird is accustomed to stealing scraps of food from campers. At times it disappeared for a period of time, possibly to other camping areas. Also, it perched quietly in nearby trees, but in the end, patience usually paid off.

It seems so appropriate that this bird of the high mountains of the West found the highest point of Alabama, beautiful Cheaha State Park. This exciting vagrant was last seen 8 May 2002. To quote Steve McConnell, “Even if the nutcracker has ended its Alabama sojourn, birders owe the Johnsons—and the lofty Mount Cheaha habitat—a debt of gratitude.”



FIGURE 1. Clark's Nutcracker at Cheaha State Park, Clay Co., Alabama, 26 April 2002 (photograph by Ann Miller).

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