

Watchable Wildlife -- Clark's Nutcracker

By Bob Garrison

No animal reflects the rugged grandeur of the Sierra Nevada better than the Clark's nutcracker. This strikingly handsome bird with its black, white and gray feathers, and loud, raucous call demands your attention amidst the subalpine forests where it lives. When harsh, cold winters drive most animals into hibernation or out of the mountains to warmer climates, the Clark's nutcracker remains active at some of the highest elevations.

Somewhat misnamed, the nutcracker uses its long, stout beak to pry pine seeds from the cones of whitebark, piñon, and other types of pines. During the late summer and fall when the pine seeds ripen, the nutcracker actively collects and caches between 20,000 and 30,000 seeds in the ground on south-facing slopes. It carries the pine seeds in a unique throat pouch beneath its tongue and can carry up to 95 seeds at one time. Throughout the winter, spring and summer, the nutcracker returns to its caches to feed. In all but the harshest storms and deepest snow drifts, the nutcracker will dig through the snow to find the seeds. They have an amazing memory and return to over 1,000 seed caches throughout the year.

It seems fitting that this hardy bird was named after William Clark of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, who first saw the nutcracker in the Rocky Mountains. The nutcracker is widespread throughout the western mountains where it is associated with high elevation pine forests. The relationship between the pines and nutcrackers are so closely aligned that biologists believe whitebark pines are completely dependent upon the nutcracker for distributing their seeds. In turn, the nutcracker's method of caching pine seeds allows them to survive in harsh climates without competition from other birds. Although nutcrackers prefer a diet of pine seeds, this highly adaptive member of the crow and jay family will move throughout the state in years of heavy snow or poor seed production to feed on a wide variety of foods.

Where to find Clark's Nutcrackers

If you venture to the Sierra Nevada this winter to ski, snowboard or snowshoe, you are likely to be greeted by the Clark's nutcracker. The subalpine pine forest generally starts above the 8,000 foot elevation so search for the birds at the tops of mountain passes or at the tops of chair lifts at ski resorts. On the east side of the Sierra, watch for nutcrackers in the pinyon-juniper forests which border highway 395 above the 7,200 foot elevation. You are likely to hear the loud, harsh call of the nutcracker long before you see it. Follow its call and scan the tops of the trees where it sits on a favorite branch.

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