

Wildlife Diversity Notebook: Brown Creeper

By Karen McClure

Common Name:

Brown creeper (also American creeper, California creeper, common creeper, little brown creeper, Mexican creeper, Sierra creeper, tree creeper)

Scientific Name:

Certhia familiaris

West Virginia Status:

The DNR Wildlife Resources Section ranks the brown creeper as vulnerable for breeding due to restricted habitat, but their nonbreeding population is considered stable.

Note: Habitat destruction is considered a threat to these birds in Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, New Jersey, New York, Idaho and Montana.

Description: Brown creepers are small (about five inches long) and slender, with long, stiff tails. They brace themselves with these tails when spiraling up trees to feed. As the name implies, brown creepers are brown overall, with white flecks on the back and head, and white undersides and eyebrows. They have reddish rumps and tails. Their well-camouflaged coloration makes them adapted for a life spent mostly on a tree trunk. Brown creepers have thin, slightly curved bills. The wingspan is seven to eight inches. These birds weigh in at one-fourth to one-third of an ounce (approximately the weight of two nickels). Brown creepers have a high-pitched, cricket-like voice. A multi-syllable song is complemented by a "see-see" call note.



A thin bill aids the creeper in pulling insects from a tree's bark.

Photo by Dan Jackson/
Cornell Lab of Ornithology



Courtesy of Wil Hershberger

The brown creeper's coloration makes it well suited to life on a tree trunk.

Habitat: Look for brown creepers in areas with evergreen trees or areas with a mix of evergreen and deciduous trees and shade trees.

Diet: Brown creepers specialize in eating insects that live in tree bark. They eat a variety of insect eggs, larvae and mature insects. They also feed on spiders and pseudoscorpions. Brown creepers pull their prey out of the bark with their bills. They work their way up the trunk, then fly to the base of another tree to creep up again. Brown creepers eat some nuts and seeds. (See Bird Butter recipe in the Sense of Wonder activity.)

Range: In winter, brown creepers live in most of the United States and Southern Canada, south to Mexico and Nicaragua. They are year-round residents of Southeastern Canada, extending south through the Appalachian Mountains in West Virginia. In West Virginia, they breed at higher elevations in northern hardwood forests, and they winter at lower elevations throughout the state.

Life History: Brown creepers usually build their nests in a dead tree, five to 15 feet high, under a strip of loose bark. Sometimes, they'll build in a tree cavity. The nest is a crescent-shaped sling of cocoons and spider egg cases, topped by a nest of moss, twigs and bark, lined with the feathers of other birds. In early spring to mid-summer, the female lays four to eight white eggs with a few brown spots. Incubation takes about two weeks, producing naked hatchlings with a tiny patch of down on their heads. The young birds leave the nest two weeks after hatching. The oldest brown creeper on record in North America was over four years old. At night, brown creepers roost clinging to the trunk of a large tree, or even the side of a house.

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