

Memory researchers study nutcracker brain

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U.S. scientists are studying Clark's nutcracker -- a bird that remembers where it buries its food in a 15-mile area -- to learn more about memory.

University of New Hampshire scientists say the Clark's nutcracker spends several weeks each autumn gathering food stores. What makes it unique is that it harvests more than 30,000 pine nuts, buries them in up to 5,000 caches and then relies almost solely on its memory as to where those caches are located to survive through winter.

Brett Gibson, an assistant professor in UNH's psychology department, and graduate student Tyler Wilks are investigating how the birds use navigational strategy to find their food.

"Nutcrackers are almost exclusively dependent upon cache recovery for their survival. So if they don't remember where they've made those caches, then they are in trouble," Gibson said.

"For us it would probably be very difficult to remember where we put 33,000 items, but these guys do it really well because of the environment they live in," Gibson said. "It's a problem evolution has solved by developing this very good memory for spatial information."

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