

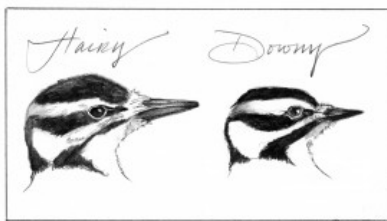
Creature Feature: Spring 2015

By W. Scott Douglas

Woodpeckers

Perhaps no other group of commonly encountered birds generates more questions in the amateur naturalist community than woodpeckers. I thought that it would be good to review some of our common, and not so common, residents of this fascinating group in this installment. Our watershed is, or has recently been, host to all of Pennsylvania's woodpeckers, but many people find identification to be challenging. All woodpeckers belong to the family Picidae. They all are characterized by using unusually stiff tail feathers to prop themselves up while clinging to tree bark. They all nest in tree cavities, and are one of the main reasons that it is good to keep some standing dead trees on your property, if you can safely do so. The characteristic drumming sound that they make when drilling under bark and into wood for insects can carry for miles and is one of the ways they communicate. This drumming can be used for identification, as can their raucous calls.

The smallest of our woodpeckers is the Downy Woodpecker, *Picoides pubescens*. It is characterized by a mottled black and white body, with a large white patch on its back and pure white belly, and is about the size of a sparrow. The male sports a spot of red on the back of the head. The Downy is a frequent visitor to feeders, especially suet feeders if provided, and will feed among twigs and leaf litter on the ground. Its nearly identical relative, the Hairy Woodpecker, *Picoides villosus*, is colored almost exactly the same, but larger, almost as big as a robin. The Hairy tends to forage in

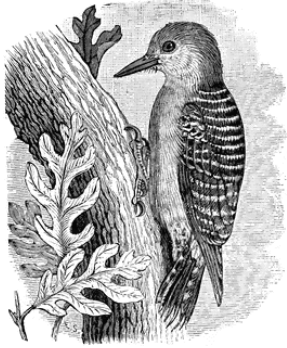


larger mature trees, higher off the ground. The easiest way to tell them apart in the field is to look at the bill. If the bill is shorter than the head is wide, it's a Downy; if the bill is as long as the head is wide, it's a Hairy.

Similar in coloration to the Downy and Hairy is the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, *Sphyrapicus varius*. It sports a mottled black and white body, but it lacks the large white spot on the back. Overall, the markings are less well defined as well, with almost a blurred or dirty appearance. It is about the same size as the Hairy, but slighter in stature. Both sexes sport red spots, but they are on the crown and forehead rather than the back. The males also have a red throat. The sapsucker is our only woodpecker

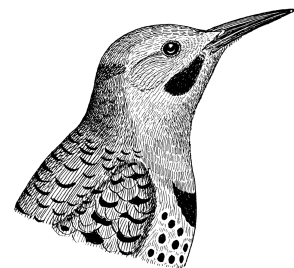


that does not eat insects exclusively. It drills holes in trees to get to the sap instead. It uses its long tongue to lick up the sap – and any insects that stick to it. If you’ve seen a longitudinal series of holes in a tree, often softwoods like birch or aspen, then you’ve seen sign of this cool bird. The sapsucker is secretive and much less likely to visit feeders, but I’ve seen it at my suet feeder occasionally. Its drum starts out quick and then slows, but is very loud and often, if another bird is nearby, you will hear a response.



The Red-bellied Woodpecker, *Melanerpes carolinus* is frequently misidentified because the red on its belly is almost impossible to see. The more visible red on this bird is on the back of the neck, extending in the males all the way forward over the crown to the bill. Its call in the woods is a distinctive loud “Quirrrrr”. The Red-bellied is slightly larger than the Hairy, with fine black and white bars on its back, but a pale tan belly. The drum often starts off with a few solitary taps, then speeds up and ends abruptly. Its close relative, the Red-headed woodpecker, *Melanerpes erythrocephalus*, has not been reported in the Watershed in many years. It is a highly distinctive black bird with a large bright white patch on its lower wings and back. Its head looks as if it was dipped in red paint; it is unmistakable from the red markings on the head of the Red-bellied. This bird is the only woodpecker that takes insects in flight, like a flycatcher. Red-headed woodpeckers exclusively nest in the large dead limbs of living trees, and are in serious decline throughout the developed parts of the State because of our tendency to prune out dead limbs from mature specimen trees. If you see a Red-headed woodpecker, especially if one is nesting in your area, please let us or Bucks County Audubon know. Many people don’t know that the Northern Flicker, *Colaptes auratus*, is a woodpecker.

Perhaps this is because it is the exception to most woodpecker “rules”. Flickers will visit feeders but, unlike all of our other woodpeckers, they prefer to hunt on the ground and forage for ants. Unlike most of our woodpeckers, the Flicker is brownish, with black bars and spots. It has a black bib on the breast, and a grey nape and crown. Both sexes have a red spot on the back of the head. The underwings are yellow, but this is hard to see unless you have a specimen or feather. What is always a good way for me to tell, is the white flash of the rump when the bird is



spooked, taking off down the trail in front of you. Its song is a long series of loud kwiks strung together in rapid succession, similar to the Pileated, but much less staccato.



The last of our six woodpeckers is the spectacular comic of the deep woods, the Pileated Woodpecker, *Dryocopus pileatus*. It is very large – the size of a crow, mostly black in body with a wide white stripe running down from the bill to the shoulder. Both sexes have a large, distinctive red crest. The raucous staccato call of the Pileated gave rise to the popular Woody the Woodpecker laugh. If you see a Pileated in flight you will know it by its sheer size; it is always startling to see anything that big flying in the woods. It is always amazing to me how well they can hide in plain sight though, crouching tight to a tree limb, or

how they will keep moving around the trunk to keep you from observing them for any length of time. Often I only see signs of their work, which are very large, messy, square-ish holes, usually low to the ground, with a whole lot of debris surrounding them.