Wild Birds Unlimited® Nature Shop

Fall 2012

BIRDTracks®

Species Profile: Northern Flicker

by DR. DAVID BIRD

Northern Flickers are one of my favorite birds, if only because they are amazingly easy to identify from a distance. Their bottom coloration dotted with numerous black bars, the red patch on the back of the head, and especially the large white patch on the rump, make them a distinctive bird indeed! Throw in that undulating flight pattern, so characteristic of the woodpeckers, and the flicker's unwoodpecker-like tendency to feed on the ground and it becomes hard to confuse this species with anything else.

Another unique morphological feature is the bright feather shaft color seen on the undersurface of the wings. Our flickers were once considered to be two separate species, the Yellow-shafted Flicker in eastern North America and the Red-shafted Flicker in the West, but the American Ornithologists Union weighed the evidence and concluded that these two morphs—along with three other visibly different ones found in Baha, Cuba, Grand Cayman, and Guatemala—are really only one species, the Northern Flicker, with five subspecies.

Northern Flicker, male.

ANN MIDDLETON/WILD BIRDS UNLIMITED

Adaptability

Although flickers prefer forest edges, open, savannah-like woodlands, and recently flooded areas with plenty of snags, they are also quite comfortable right in your backyard in a town or city. Their selection of trees for feeding, roosting, and nesting is highly variable.

Whenever I get a phone call describing a brownish bird with black spots feeding on the ground, I know right away that the bird is a flicker. Flickers adore eating ants! About half of their summer diet is ants. Joining ants at the top of the menu are predaceous ground beetles. Because insects are not always available throughout the year, flickers will shift to fruits and seeds in winter. Depending on whether we are talking about yellow-shafted or red-shafted birds, some of their favorites include the fruits of poison ivy and poison oak, bayberry, gooseberry, sour gum, wild pepper berry, woodbine, elder, sunflower, flowering dogwood, blackberry and raspberry, smooth sumac, and other sumacs. Although I would not recommend the first two species, some of the other ones listed might be good to attract flickers to your yard.

We're less certain about the appeal

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Birds in Depth

Built Tough as Nails

by JOHN SCHAUST

In writing about the Downy Woodpecker, the famous naturalist and artist John James Audubon observed that it was, "not surpassed by any of its tribe in hardiness, industry or vivacity."

In today's terms we would just say that it is downright tough!

The Downy Woodpecker, along with all of its woodpecker relatives, has an amazing array of adaptations that allows it to live a punishing existence that most other birds would probably consider a life condemned to hard labor.

Even a woodpecker's skin is tough. It is actually thicker than most other birds', providing it with an extra level of protection while knocking about on the rough bark of trees. It also helps to defend against the painful bites of ants and other insects on which it feeds.

Woodpeckers are not only thick-skinned, they are hardheaded, too.

While excavating a cavity, a woodpecker's head can strike a tree's surface at speeds up to 13 mph. The force of this impact (approximately 10 Gs) would be enough to create brain damage in most other birds, and a human brain is 50 times more likely than a woodpecker's to suffer injury at this speed. (Imagine running headfirst into a tree at full speed!)

Woodpeckers are able to survive this pounding due to numerous adaptations, including a skull that is uniquely structured to cushion the blows. The skull consists of lightweight, spongy, air-filled bone, and yet it is incredibly strong due a reinforcing meshwork of bony support struts. A woodpecker's skull is also very small in relationship to the size of its brain. Thus, there is little room for the brain to rattle around during severe impacts and suffer damage. Protection is also provided by a flexible layer of cartilage found between the bones of the skull and beak, which cushions the shock of each blow.

And speaking of the beak, with all of that pounding, why doesn't it wear down to a ragged nub? Wear down it does, but special cells on the end of the bill are constantly replacing the lost material. This keeps the chisel-pointed bill strong and resilient, while it actually self-sharpens with every blow.

With all this heavy hitting, woodpeckers are sure to create a lot of fast flying debris. To protect themselves, they have evolved their own version of a dust mask and safety glasses. The dust mask consists of tufts of stiff feathers that grow over both nostrils to prevent small bits of wood from entering their nostrils, and the safety glasses are in the form of a protective third eyelid thatb helps to prevent debris from entering their eyes.

The other end of a woodpecker is also built tough. Its sharply pointed tail feathers are especially strong and rigid and have been compared to the climbing spikes that telephone line workers use to grip onto poles.

A woodpecker's tailbone, its lower vertebrae, and its tail's supporting muscles are also large in comparison to other birds. These modifications allow a woodpecker's tail to serve as a stout kickstand that supports its weight as it climbs trees and excavates cavities.

The woodpecker's unique tail is just one of its many adaptations you can witness as these hardy birds visit your yard. Woodpeckers can easily be attracted to feeders filled with suet and no-melt dough and are especially drawn to the varieties containing nuts, like Wild Birds Unlimited Naturally Nuts. Used in combination with a WBU Tail Prop feeder, you can get an up-close and personal look at one of the toughest guys in the neighborhood.

Red-headed Woodpecker.

BILL THOMPSON, III

How Do Woodpeckers Know Where to Peck?

Woodpeckers may find their hidden prey by sound and/or smell:

- As a woodpecker strikes a tree, it may zero in on the hollow sounds that echo off of the tunnels (galleries) of wood-boring insects (like thumping a watermelon).
- Woodpeckers may also hear the audible "chewing" sound that many insect grubs make by feeding on the inner bark of trees.
- Woodpeckers have a better sense of smell than most birds, and may be able to detect the strong odor of the formic acid that ants, bark beetles, and termites excrete (smells like Sweet Tarts candies).

News on the Fly

Hotspots and Nose Dives

by DAVID BIRD

Emperor Penguins Face the Heat

As global temperatures continue to rise and melt the sea ice, the birds that have the most to lose are the penguins in the Antarctic, according to scientists analyzing models to forecast their future. Indeed, if current trends continue, the Emperor Penguin, standing four feet tall and featured in the Oscar-winning films *March of the Penguins* and *Happy Feet*, may march no more. These penguins in particular raise their young exclusively on sea ice; if that ice breaks up and disappears early into the breeding season, massive breeding failure will result. As a double whammy, the loss of the sea ice will also affect the birds' food supply by causing severe declines in the numbers of the phytoplankton and zooplankton which are dependent on that ice to breed and which serve as nutrition for the squid, fish, and krill upon which the penguins feed. Even without these issues, only half of Emperor Penguin chicks typically survive the breeding season, and half of those die before the next year. For instance, the Dion Islet colony—once thriving at 250 pairs in the 1970s—dropped to 20 pairs in 1999 and then to zero by 2009.

North American Wildlife Management Program: A Big Boost for Ducks and Geese

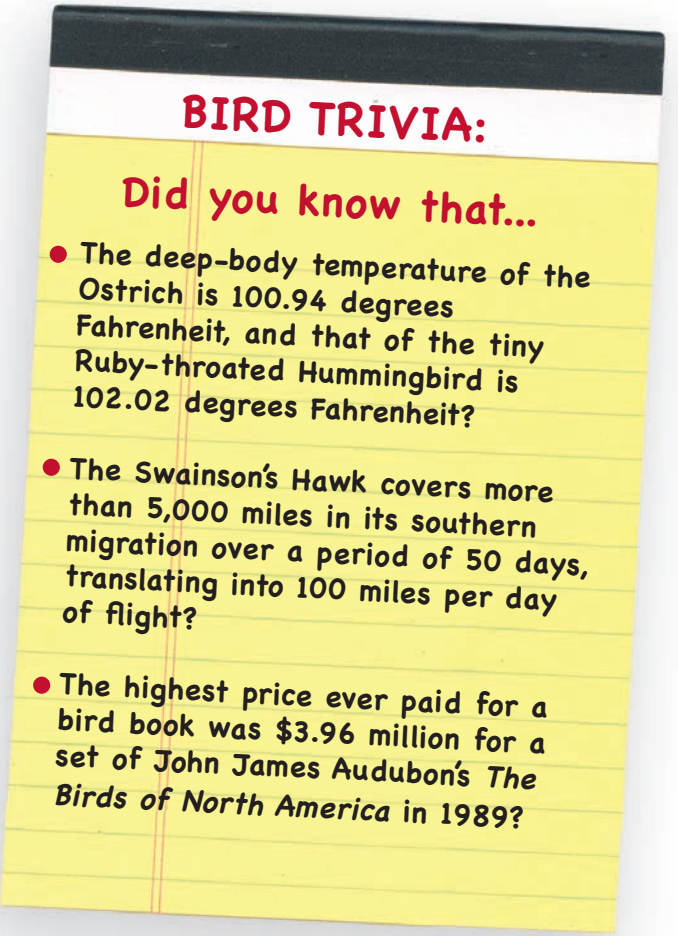
United States Interior Secretary Ken Salazar signed the 2012 Revision of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) on May 31 at the 75th anniversary National Conference of Ducks Unlimited, Inc., in Nashville, Tennessee. The 2012 NAWMP Revision sets forth three overarching goals for waterfowl conservation: 1) abundant and resilient waterfowl populations to support hunting and other uses without imperiling habitat; 2) wetlands and related habitats sufficient to sustain waterfowl populations at desired levels, while providing places to recreate and ecological services that benefit society; and 3) growing numbers of waterfowl hunters, other conservationists, and citizens who enjoy and actively support waterfowl and wetlands conservation. The first two goals have always been part of the NAWMP. The third goal underscores the importance of people to the success of waterfowl and wetlands conservation. A companion Action Plan is also in the work.

Barn Swallow Numbers Nose-Diving All Over the World

Breeding Bird Survey data collected by Canadian scientists have revealed a 2.9 percent annual decline in Barn Swallow populations during the past three decades. The decline is getting worse, steepening in the past 10 years to 7.6 percent annually. In the country's largest province, the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas data support the disturbing trend—Barn Swallow numbers have dropped by 1/3 during the past 20 years. In the U.S., the decline has been slightly smaller at 1.4 percent in the same period. If the situation does not reverse, the Barn Swallow will be a strong candidate for Canada's endangered species list. Although the species is widespread and found virtually all over the world, BirdLife International has released a recent report indicating that breeding populations of Barn Swallows in Europe are also decreasing, albeit moderately, and showing no signs of recovery. The cause of the decline has not yet been pinpointed.

Plastic Trash Ingestion by Pacific Northwestern Seabirds Among the Highest in the World

According to a July 2012 report in the *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, seabirds are ingesting more plastic trash than ever before and the rates are the highest in the world in those birds living off the coasts of Washington State and British Columbia. The study, carried out in 2009 – 2010, involved examining the stomach contents of 67 Northern Fulmars washed up on the shoreline from Long Beach, California to Vancouver Island. Fulmars are especially useful for studies aimed at measuring the ocean's health because they forage almost exclusively at sea over vast ranges and they consume just about anything floating on the surface. This finding is particularly troubling because it is well known that the plastic displaces the space in the stomach that the birds need to fill with nutritious food and it can also lacerate the stomach lining. Some gizzards were completely full of plastic. As an indirect hazard to the seabirds, the plastic also accumulates high levels of contaminants which leach out into the birds' bodies to cause health and reproductive problems. One way to tackle this problem is for the public to buy fewer drink products in plastic bottles; many of these end up in the ocean.



The Backyard Watcher

by BILL THOMPSON, III

Top 10 Countdown to Fall

Whether you'd like to admit it or not, summer is almost over and autumn is nearly upon us. Spring cleaning gets more attention, but for the backyard bird watcher there's just as much to do in fall as in spring.

I like the anticipation of fall. At our place fall migration is almost always better than spring migration—we get more birds, and we get more unusual birds. The only thing missing is fresh spring plumage and the symphony of singing males. To ensure that you get the most out of this fall's migration, I offer these suggestions for the birds in your backyard.

10 Water in motion. Moving water in your birdbath created by a mister, dripper, or WBU Water Wiggler is a fantastic way to attract birds. During spring and fall migration, when species not normally found in your area are passing through, an attractive birdbath can make them stop to bathe or drink. Make sure your bath is clean and in a spot where you can easily observe it throughout the day.

9 Keep the cat indoors. Migrant birds are not familiar with your backyard's delights or dangers. A lurking cat can take a heavy toll during migration as unsuspecting birds are lured into your yard by habitat, water, and food. It's a good idea to keep your cat indoors throughout the year, but it's especially important during fall migration, when adult birds are joined by naïve youngsters making their first southward flight.

8 Replace old, dirty nests. It seems that our late-summer broods of bluebirds are always the messiest. By the time the young have fledged, the insides of the nest box are caked with droppings, feather dust, and insect parts. We always give the houses a good sweeping out in the fall and replace the filthy old nest with a clean new cup of dried grasses. It's good to think of bluebirds, chickadees, or a downy woodpecker snuggled deep inside the box on a cold winter night.

7 Feeder check up and inventory. I When fall is here, winter is getting ready for its grand entrance. If you live in a region where winter is harsh, now is the time to look over those large-capacity feeders that have been in storage since last spring. Are they fit for another winter of use? Do they need a good cleaning? Do you want to upgrade or expand your feeders and offerings? Avoid the holiday rush and get your shopping done now!

6 Let your garden go. It's hard to resist the urge to pull up all the dead tomato, squash, and other plants in the garden once the growing season is over. And some gardening experts encourage this immediate yanking and burning of the old plants to reduce the chance of plant disease carrying over to the next spring. We've never subscribed to that theory, but then we don't spray pesticides or herbicides, either. We're not just organic, we're laissez faire organic, which translates to "lazy." Our birds thank us by feeding on the old seedheads of our flowers and garden plants. Sparrows, towhees, and juncos skulk in the thick, dead vegetation. Sure, the garden lacks a certain tidiness, but it's always full of birds,

5 Let your lawn go. It's all about seedheads. Stop mowing a section of your lawn in late summer and let the long grass go to seed. This is your own natural bird food. Passing buntings, sparrows, and finches will thank you by spending time in your grass. During the past 16 winters we've lived on our farm, our unmown lawn sections have attracted Pine Siskins, Tree Sparrows, Lincoln's Sparrows, one Grasshopper Sparrow, plus the usual species (juncos; goldfinches; Indigo Buntings; and Song, Chipping, and Field Sparrows). Of course, be sure to follow local lawn-care ordinances.

4 Leave your leaves. Leaving your fallen leaves alone helps your birds both directly and indirectly. The leaves trap and hold moisture from dew and rain, which helps keep your lawn from drying out. As the leaves break down (mowing over them can hasten this) they add valuable nutrients to the soil. Fallen leaves also attract and are fed upon by insects, which in turn are fed upon by birds such as robins, blackbirds, thrushes, bluebirds, catbirds, thrashers, and so on. A healthy lawn is always a birdy lawn.

3 Scatter seed. I know bird feeding is best done from feeders, but I still feel good when I scatter a handful of mixed seed, sunflower hearts, peanut bits, or WBU Select Blend under the brush piles and thick shrubbery around our lawn. This food is intended for those skulking species that may be reluctant to come to our feeders—the sparrows, thrashers, catbirds, towhees, and others that are too shy to venture across our yard to the centralized feeding stations. I am sure that chipmunks and field mice enjoy this banquet, too. But then again, they might lure an American Kestrel or Red-tailed Hawk into the yard seeking a mammalian meal.

2 Keep hummer feeders up. You've probably heard the myth: Take down your hummingbird feeders in the fall or the hummers will "forget" to migrate. It's not true. Birds, including the hummingbirds at our feeders, are programmed by instinct to migrate when their inner clocks tell them to leave. Changes in daylight (in terms of the length and intensity of sunlight), affect the birds' departure date and time, as do changes in weather. But there's no way your feeder will interfere with a bird's migratory urge, unless the bird is hindered from migrating by some other factor such as illness or injury. Sick or injured birds and late migrants from points to the north of you will benefit from your late-fall feeding station. Leaving your hummer feeders up will do no harm, and it might even do some good. (Make sure your feeders are clean and the solution is fresh.)

1 Make your windows safe for migrants. Migrant birds get restless and almost hyperactive in the fall. Watch a Red-eyed Vireo chase a warbler all over your yard and you'll see what I mean. All this activity around your house can have tragic results if one or more of your windows is in a location where flying birds strike the glass. Silhouettes of flying hawks or falcons work, but they perform best when applied on the outside of the glass. Hanging ornaments such as wind chimes, wind socks, and potted plants also helps. Misting the outside of the window with a very weak detergent or baking soda solution will eliminate the reflection but will also impair visibility for you. Awnings, eave extensions, and window screens will eliminate all reflection and stop the collision problem. Plastic cling wrap applied to the inside or outside of the window can also be effective. One of the most effective solutions we have found is a simple device called FeatherGuard, which combines bright color and motion to warn birds away from windows. Whatever you do, make sure it works to break up the window's reflection or prevent birds from striking the glass.

JULIE ZICKEFOOSE

Frequently Asked

Q's

by Kevin Cook

Q: Our backyard adjoins a railroad right-of-way that we walk through regularly. We recently found a small nest about three feet above ground. It was tightly woven into what seemed to be a plant that was more weed than shrub. Whose nest could it be?

A: Exactly what bird it could be depends on where you live, but a few likely widespread species include Yellow Warbler, Field Sparrow, or American Goldfinch.

You can distinguish them by structure and materials. Sparrows use bulky material for the outside but build a more compact structure. Warblers and goldfinches use fine, slender materials and build a very tight, compact structure that usually includes much plant floss from thistles, willows, or cottonwoods.

Q: Birds seem absolutely determined to drink from my roof gutter instead of the birdbath I bought for them. How can I get them to use the birdbath where I can see them?

A: A roof gutter that holds enough water to attract birds in not functioning properly. A gutter that holds water will deteriorate and can contribute to structural damage from wood rot.

Just to prevent costly damage to your house, you need to get the gutter rehung or replaced so that it drains completely and does not hold water. Once you solve the maintenance problem, your bird problem will solve itself.

Q: I see Dark-eyed Juncos around my summer residence in Michigan and around my winter residence in New Mexico, and I often wonder if they could be the same birds. Is it possible the juncos migrates the way I do?

A: Possible, yes; likely, no.

Banding studies allow us to work out such details. Birds can be uniquely marked so that band numbers, colors, or positions indicate where the bird was captured and marked. Subsequent sightings or recaptures then yield information about how far various birds travel and in what directions

Statistically, juncos from the upper Midwest tend to move primarily north-south and remain east of the Great Plains. If you see Dark-eyed Juncos in the summer, you reside far enough north that you could be in an area where the juncos are more sedentary and less likely to migrate at all.

Your winter juncos in New Mexico are far more likely coming from Alaska and northwestern Canada.

Northern Flicker— *Continued from page 1*

of birdbaths to flickers. Little is known about drinking and bathing in this species. A few birds have been seen to drink from natural catch-basins, such as knotholes in trees, but descriptions of bathing behavior are almost nonexistent.

As for feeders, Northern Flickers will dine on sunflower seed and cracked corn, but they are not likely to become regular guests, mainly because they really do prefer to eat insects on the ground. High-fat offerings such as suet cakes and Jim's Birdacious Bark Butter can prove attractive, especially to the red-shafted Northern Flickers in the West.

Flickers are present year-round across most of the continental United States, and during breeding season they expand their range northward into most of Canada and into Alaska as well. You can expect to see flickers, like many of our songbirds, arrive on the breeding grounds in early April. The northern populations of flickers are more migratory than the rather sedentary southern ones.

In early May both members of a pair, with the male dominating, carve out a nesting hole in about two weeks. At the rate of one per day, the female lays six to seven semi-glossy white eggs. Fed by both parents, the youngsters fledge in 24 to 27 days.

Depending on the habitat and scarcity of suitable nesting trees, flickers might use an artificial nesting box. The box's dimensions should be 16 to 24 inches high, with an interior size of 7 by 7 inches; the entrance hole diameter about 2½ inches. Place it up about 10 to 20 feet in a tree in any open habitat. Cedar and fake stucco siding are susceptible to flickers making nesting or roosting holes. Mounting a

Red-shafted adult male Northern Flicker.

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BirdWatcher's Digest

In every issue of *BirdTracks* we feature questions from you, our best customers. We welcome your suggestions, comments and questions. We also hope to share your tips and ideas for enhancing our enjoyment of backyard birds and wildlife with other *BirdTracks* readers all over North America.

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Northern Flicker—

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flicker box can prevent this behavior and accommodate flickers by replacing lost nesting habitat. The Certified Birdfeeding Specialists at Wild Birds Unlimited can help you attract and accommodate these fascinating birds.

Flickers breed in their first spring, and at least one individual reached its ninth birthday in the wild.

But not all is well with the Northern Flicker. Perhaps due to our overzealous desire to rid the world of dead and decaying trees and the associated serious competition for nesting holes from the ubiquitous European Starlings, flickers have been declining in numbers since 1966. Where pesticides are heavily used on lawns to kill insects, including the flicker's favorite foods, flickers feeding at ground level are highly susceptible to poisoning and often show up with nervous system tremors in wildlife rehabilitation centers.

TIP:

Want to do something to help out our flickers? Because snags (dead trees) are highly preferred for nesting and feeding but in short supply, consider leaving up the main trunk of that dead or dying tree you're planning to have removed. Convince your local town authorities and local forestry companies to better manage the cutting of dead trees so that some snags are left for flickers and other wildlife species. A density of around 90 snags per 250 acres would allow flickers to reach 100 percent of their potential nesting density. Danger to the public has to be considered, but surely not every snag has to be removed.