

They Call Him Flicker

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“Many odd incidents have been related of the Flicker, its courtship and its nesting, that one might be disposed to attribute to it a sense of humor, or even to dub it a clown among the birds.”

A.F. Ganier 1926

We love to watch him fly, with his flashy underwings and bold white rump. He is a regular visitor at our bird feeding stations, unknowingly putting on a show when he brings his noisy fledglings to our homes. Among the 23 North American woodpeckers, this “clown among the birds” is the most common but the least woodpecker-like of them all. We call him, “flicker,” and he is an extraordinary addition to our continental avifauna.

Unlike its scansorial, or tree-climbing, cousins, the Northern Flicker spends most of its life on the ground, probing with its bill into underground tunnels that conceal its favorite forage—the ant. Flickers eat more ants than any bird in North America, and they are handily equipped. The woodpecker tongue in general is one of the most amazing adaptations in the animal world, but the flicker's tongue defies the imagination.

The fleshy part of the woodpecker tongue is elongated and attached to a complex system of bones and muscles called the hyoid apparatus. At the base of the tongue, the hyoid splits to form the flared part of an elongated “Y”. These two branches are the hyoid horns, which separate in front of the trachea, wrapping beneath the skull and around the outside and rear of the cranium, the two horns coming together and ending side-by-side near the right eye. But in order to be the champion ant-eater, the flicker needs more. The flicker's hyoid horns continue forward, past the orbital socket and nasal openings and into the maxilla, or upper mandible. When a flicker is at rest, both the forward tip and the terminal ends of its tongue are inside its bill structure!

But the flicker's incredibly long tongue system could not itself withdraw ants from their burrow. Each time the tongue is extended, which can be many times per second, its sandpaper-like surface passes by an extra-large pair of salivary glands. Thus, a flicker's tongue enters an ant burrow covered with sticky saliva, which the ants cannot overcome.

Birders love their flickers. And what's not to love? Gorgeous plumage and entertaining behavior make this woodpecker a favorite of many. But if you mention woodpeckers to a non-birder, you just may stir up some less-than-loving emotions. As our most common woodpecker, the flicker bears the brunt of the negative sentiments many humans have for woodpeckers in general.

“How can get that bird to stop drilling holes in my house? I've spent \$400 repairing those holes and he just keeps on drilling!”

When folks share their frustrations, they are often alluding to their neighborhood flicker. Excavating a nest cavity is part of the woodpecker lifestyle, and flickers choose our homes on which to practice these behaviors for a number of reasons.

As an ant-eating, ground-dwelling woodpecker, the Northern Flicker is well adapted for probing underground ant tunnels, but its adaptations for the terrestrial lifestyle make it less well suited for excavating cavities than most woodpeckers.

The flicker's relatively narrow and slightly decurved bill does not distribute the forces associated with hammering like the straight broad bill of its more arboreal cousins. Instead of drilling for its own abode, a flicker will often choose to roost or nest in a “previously-owned” cavity. It may have to expand the entrance a bit, so that multiple flicker nestlings can beg for food at the same time—helpful since the flicker lays the largest brood of all our woodpeckers.

Most woodpecker species excavate cavities in dead or dying trees or in large dead branches, but these features of our natural landscape are often seen as eyesores. Sometimes trees die in places where, as snags, they jeopardize public safety. So to maintain aesthetics and to keep our world safe, we eliminate standing snags.

Flickers thrive in suburban habitats, and they need cavities inside which they can raise their young. But we have removed the potential nest trees, driving most woodpecker species to more suitable expanses, and leaving the flicker with fewer existing cavities. This requires that your neighborhood flicker excavate its own nest site, and, as they say, “When opportunity knocks ...”

The flicker will opportunistically exploit the softest or most hollow wood surface available and especially one that is close to an abundant food supply. A flicker in need of a cavity may fly to the side of your home and tap on the wood siding.

“Hmmm,” says the flicker, “this sounds good.”

And so excavation begins—on the side of your house! Sometimes the flicker creates an opening in the siding only to peer into what is clearly not a suitable place for a nest cavity. But he is on a roll, so he moves a few feet to the left or right, taps to reveal another hollow-sounding surface, and begins another cavity entrance. Much to the dismay of the homeowner, this can go on for many rounds, leaving the side of the house with a new source of ventilation. The flicker may eventually move on in search of more suitable surfaces, but he has left you with an expensive repair project.

This problem has a relatively simple solution. You can serve as a surrogate of sorts and provide a suitable nest site for your neighborhood flicker. Use the flicker’s penchant for opportunity to your advantage and install an artificial nest structure. In the search for an alternative to your inadequate siding, the flicker will often occupy a nest box. Some woodpecker species will roost overnight in boxes, but very few utilize them for nesting. The opportunistic flicker is the exception. Download the specs for a homemade flicker box from the Internet, or visit your local backyard birding store for a “previously excavated” box. Install it someplace conspicuous and you just might save your siding.

The lack of suitable nest cavities—or suitable sites for creating one—has become a rangewide problem for the Northern Flicker. Data from the Christmas Bird Count and Breeding Bird Survey show significant declines in long-term numbers tallied. Snag removal is a major contributing factor to any declining woodpecker population, but the flicker’s challenge is compounded by competition for cavities with the European Starling.

We should be careful not to demonize the starling just for being very good at what it does. Humans brought the starlings to America long ago, before we knew anything about ecology and bird conservation. Today, we are left with this legacy, and we are challenged to conserve our native bird populations. A number of studies have shown the Northern Flicker to be submissive to the starling when it comes to occupying a nest cavity. Often, a flicker will excavate or expand a cavity, only to have it usurped by a pair of starlings. We can help the flicker in the same way we prevent it from excavating in our homes, by installing artificial nest boxes. But let’s take it one step further, by actively working to retain and recruit snags that can eventually become suitable nest sites for all cavity nesters.

Despite their status as a weak excavator, flickers excavate thousands of cavities each year across their expansive range. This places them in a “keystone” ecological role by providing cavities for dozens of other bird species. Just as removing a keystone from an arch will cause the arch to collapse, removing flickers from an ecosystem will cause irreversible harm to all the birds, and other organisms, that depend on flickers for their cavities. By leaving snags standing in flicker habitat, and by allowing trees to die and become snags, we can go a long way in giving the beautiful Northern Flicker a fighting chance for a long future as our favorite clown among birds.

What to Look and Listen For

Conspicuous and ubiquitous, the Northern Flicker is hard to miss. Any large, brown woodpecker hopping around on the open ground is a dead giveaway. In North America, only the Pileated and Ivory-billed woodpeckers are larger. Some folks may confuse these two for each other, but the flicker stands alone.

In flight, the flicker shows brightly colored underwings and a bold white rump, and its flight style is more direct than the typical undulating woodpecker. A perched bird displays a brownish “zebra-backed” pattern above, with a sharp black breast-shield and a grayish belly covered with black spots.

A closer look will reveal the flicker's regionally variable face and head pattern. Both male and female "Yellow-shafted" flickers show a bright red V-shaped nape patch; the male also has two bold black mustache stripes. Male "Red-shafted" flickers have red mustache stripes, but neither the male nor the female shows any color on the nape. Any flicker with some combination of these markings is likely an intergrade between the two forms. Other subtle plumage characters, such as the color of the throat and variability in wing color may also reveal mixed parentage.

Flickers are just as easily heard as seen, with two primary calls heard most frequently: the single call note, sounding like a descending *kee'er* or *kee'ew*; and the territorial or courtship "jungle call", a rapid series of notes like *kee, kee, kee, kee...*, with all notes generally at the same pitch and cadence. The flicker's drum roll is often difficult to distinguish from other woodpecker species, but it is also delivered at a rapid, steady cadence.

When and Where to Look

Northern Flickers occur from the northern treeline of North America south into Mexico, Central American, and the Caribbean. "Yellow-shafted" populations breed from western Alaska across northern Canada, then east of the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. "Red-shafted" flickers breed from the Rockies westward, and from Southeast Alaska to Nicaragua.

Sedentary, or non-migratory, populations reside across most of the continent, but their numbers expand in winter with the influx of northern birds from Alaska and Canada. The western states tend to host more individuals with mixed parentage than those states east of the Rockies, but intergrades can occur anywhere in winter, especially in the southern and western United States.

They Called Him Names

Originally named the "Golden Cuckoo" (*Cuculus auratus*) by Linnaeus in 1758, the Northern Flicker boasts more than 130 folk names from peoples past and present across the continent. Here are just a few of the author's favorites, as reported in 1900 and 1910 by Chester County, Pennsylvania's, "leading amateur ornithologist", Frank L. Burns:

Cotton-rump, Silver-dollar Bird, Xebec: the first two from Pennsylvania, the third from New Hampshire, all for its white rump, and the latter after a small ship of the same name that carried a large supply of canvas (which must have appeared as a white patch on an otherwise dark ship).

Dishwasher: from late 18th century Maryland, for unknown reasons, though also once ascribed to the Pied Wagtail of Europe and Asia.

Fiddler: Cape Cod, Mass., possibly from the repeated bobbing motions of courting birds.

Mo-ning-qua-na: Chippewa (White Earth Reservation, northwestern Minnesota) for "bird with dirty colored wings".

Meadow Partridge: Wisconsin, for its habit of flushing from the grasslands like a game bird.

O-zaw-wan-day Paw-Paw-say: Pottawattomie (lower peninsula of Michigan), the first word meaning "yellow" or "golden-colored" and the second referring to a name for the flea, for its habit of jumping unpredictably on the ground.

Shad-spirit: New England Coast, for its spring arrival foretelling of the spring run of shad.

Will Crisson: Dismal Swamp, North Carolina, possibly a distant corruption of one of the species' calls.

Yellowhammer: as with the naming of the American Robin, likely given to the “Yellow-Shafted” Northern Flicker by early settlers who longed for sights of the homeland, the name referring to a small, yellowish Eurasian bunting. Also the name given to the flicker as the state bird of Alabama.

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