

Now, about those Birds--pest or friend, our local Woodpeckers are interesting! Flickers, Acorns and Nuttall's Woodpeckers abound here!

BY JIM HIATT OF HUNGRY HOLLOW



Acorn Woodpecker on power lines and tree branches in Capay Valley...



...and his handiwork: stowed acorns in tree branches.

Capay Valley is a natural home for the several species of woodpeckers that thrive here, due to our hilly areas with lots of oaks in the lower realms and pines in the higher areas. Where I live in the west end of Hungry Hollow, then over the Capay hills and up the Valley, we have species that are in the hills and valley year-round, like the Flickers and Acorn Woodpeckers and the uniquely-striped Nuttall's Woodpeckers—as well as a couple of others less frequently seen.

The Flickers are partially migratory hereabouts, coming down into the "flatlands" for mid-fall into early spring, and then matriculating back into the hilly areas. They sort of "trade places" with the Kingbirds, who usually leave here about the beginning of Dove season (Sept. 1, give or take), and return, depending on the onset of warmth, from mid-March to mid-April. The page references given for all birds are

from *Birds of North America*.

The Acorn Woodpecker (seen in above photos and on page 383 of *Birds of North America*), *Melanerpes formicivorus* is one of the 3 most common Oak woodpeckers of these parts. These are very social and perhaps the most seen bird of these groves. We used to have these in Woodland as well, when Woodland was closer to 10,000 in population, more of a *large farm town*, and used to have many more Valley Oaks and Walnut trees than at present. They have basically two calls--one is a series of "Crack-it! Crack-it! Crack-it! Crack-it," usually 3 to 5 at a time. Davy Crockett had a rare sense of humor, and he, as in touch with nature as he was, when running for election, would have said--"Listen, friend, even the WOODPECKERS want me to win--just listen to 'em calling out "Crockett!, Crockett!, Crockett!, Crockett!" They also have a slightly slower single

"Crrrrack!! Crrrraccck-itttt!!!" rolling their R's nicely, and giving one at a time several times in a series. They are very industrious about laying up a store of acorns for later needs, and drill holes in preferably dead-wood (seen above, right), as it's softer, and drills out easier, and hide these by the score to be had in non-yielding time. Oaks are not the only trees that these are hidden in; just about anything that's high and has a cavity of sorts---even power pole insulators with a hollow in the top (see photo top left) are storage containers for these. The hole's already drilled out, and with a hollow in the top it saves such wear and tear on their beaks with those ceramic contraptions. Insects and fruits are also dined upon. One may perch at the top of a pole or high branch, peer about, and upon seeing a bug in the air, display aeronautics not unlike Kingbirds or Phoebes in skillfully twisting and turning to capture a part of a meal.



Above: yellow shafted female Flicker in Hungry Hollow, Nov. 2013



All photos taken in Capay Valley Jim Hiatt



In center: Red shafted male, Nov 2013.

Above: a page on our Flickers in *Birds of North America*

There are a couple of incredible mechanical features in these creatures not found among others birds. In pecking on trees or under bark, woodpeckers fall into the category of "drummers," making a very rapid fire staccato-like banging, at maybe half a dozen to a dozen strokes a second. As a child I used to wonder how they kept from jarring their little brains into early senility in this process, as each stroke is a "hammer-strike" into solid wood. Turns out that they have a "shock-absorber" built into the base of their skulls that are layers of cartilage which "squish" to absorb the impact, so for them it's all pretty stress free. In addition to drumming, "pecking" at loose bark is another method of rounding up a meal, and Flickers are more ones to poke and pry at loose bark sheets and strips off the sides of Eucalyptus trunks (see pic again). These also have, as do other woodpeckers, a shorter and much stiffer tail than birds in general, which acts as a "brace" that can be leaned back on when climbing and working on the edges of branches. The two toes forward and two backward are also useful for a

strong grip as it carries on its tree activities.

The Northern Flicker, *Colates auratus* (above, and on page 400 in *Birds of North America*) is another such feathered neighbor. This used to be called either the Red-shafted Flicker, or the Yellow-shafted Flicker when I was much younger, and refers to the coloration of the undersides of the wing and tail feathers; either a salmon-orange color or a very golden yellow coloration. Later they were "lumped" into the same species name. These may or may not have a "mustache" just in from both sides of the beak. See the top right photo from BONA showing this. The Red-Shafteds have a red one in both male and female, whereas with the Yellows, the male has a black mustache and a red crescent on the back of the base of the head, while the female has neither. It's also one of the few woodpeckers that also forages on the ground for food. They have a long, round Sticky 4" or so tongue that they sweep around under bark or into dead wood, and then withdraw the tongue with a variety of appetizers "stuck" to it.

Upon alighting, a call is issued. Along with a few very rapidly jerking down-and-up deep "bows" is a loud, whining "EEEEEE-RRRR!" repeated a number of times. This is its "I am here, this is now *my area!* *Stay away!!* It also has a softer "wicker, wicker wicker, wicker" call given when it's hard at work and likely has found enough food-fare to justify its staying a while. Another call is given either as it's nearing its tree or as it's just about to land—it is hard-to-describe unless you just hear it: whiffling or ruffling, "wa-ha-ha-how-how-ho!" You'd know it if you heard it. It is given in flight as it nears where it's going to land, and sometimes as it nears a perch but at the last second changes its mind on that one and goes on to another, hence hearing this same sound intermittently as it nears where it wants to go means: "I'm about to land, and whether I stay or not, just know that I'm coming in and I don't want company! I'm gonna be not-so-easy-to-get-along-with once I arrive!" Food is pretty much insects and spiders found under bark or on the ground. The Northern Flicker isn't as much into

Continue on page 14

Continued: Woodpeckers, Flickers & Sapsuckers are in the family *Picidae*.



A Capay Valley regular: Nuttall's Woodpecker among the oak balls in Nov. 2014; photos by Jim Hiatt

seeds or acorns. The eucalyptus are a favorite tree to forage in, as they usually have a bark-type that peels off continually in the life of the tree.



Above: Jim pulls away some eucalyptus bark to reveal a Northern Flicker's delight--bugs!

NOTE: Flickers usually nest in dead wood, laying 1 brood of 6-8 eggs in May-June. The parents take turns incubating the eggs. They feed mainly on ants in breeding season--often feeding on the ground; and also fruits in winter.

Another medium-sized one that is indigenous hereabouts, is the **Nuttall's Woodpecker** (seen above and on page 392), **Picoides nutallii**, having a black and white striped back and red upper back of the head. This is one of the few woodpeckers that creeps and works away along the *underside* of branches with their unique gripping ability. The Nuttall is primarily an insect eater, but also enjoys sometimes fruits and berries. Its call is a loud "Chink!" or "Pink!" given singly, or in a rapid-fire series, descending at the end in volume when in flight from one tree to another. It just means: "Careful, this spot's already taken!"

On rare occasions a Lewis Woodpecker, **Melanerpes lewis**

(page 381) can be seen hereabouts. Named after Meriwether Lewis, the early American explorer and William Clark's companion. [NOTE: William Clark was also blessed with having a bird named after him, the Clark's Nutcracker--very colorful, but not often seen here.] The Lewis has iridescent-green upper parts and a sort of mauve-maroon coloration on its breast, abdomen and face, as well. It has a slow but steady wing-beat, and is considered rather large. I've seen these just south of Madison many years ago.

Higher up in elevation, on occasion, a Pileated Woodpecker, **Dryocopus pileatus**, (page 402) may be seen. This very large, crow-sized woodpecker is quite a beautiful bird--and the only one featured in *Birds of North America*, other than the Ivory Billed, which may or may not be extinct, and was larger, yet--with a crest, an upturn of feathers at the back of the head. I've seen these along Rayhouse Road, and you're first struck by the size and the lovely red head crest and "moustache"--a cheek patch.

A Northern Flicker Woodpecker, up close and personal...

Jim assured me he did not shoot this one--his feral cats dispatched him! And while the little fella was still in good shape, Jim was able to pick him up and photograph his interesting features for this article. The following text from Jim Hiatt explains the related photos he sent --

Northern Flicker: the Red-shafted and Yellow-Shafted were originally considered different species, as their wing undersides were either a golden yellow or a salmon-reddish--like this one pictured here. I suppose even birders have their reasons for "splitting" species, depending on whether they interbreed and so on. We have both kinds here--and always have had. I used to shoot them for Grandma Goodnow in Hungry Hollow, as they pecked holes in the sides of the house, garage and barn. The old north side of the garage, along the upper gabled part of the wall next to the roof, was a smattering of tin can lids nailed up there, each to cover a Flicker hole. It's how I came to know the difference in plumage, like which ones had a "moustache" on either cheek, and whether it was a dark gray one, a red one, and so on. You learn so much doing things for Grandma like this—clever ol' bird that she was!

These, like so many other woodpeckers, have a "shock-absorber" mechanism built into the back of the base of their skulls so they don't rattle

their brains loose in pecking. A verry long stick-like tongue for sneaking waaay under bark to catch and drag out the bugs that got caught on it, seen below. Note, also, the red "mustache," indicating this one is male, females have no mustache.



The long tail is designed for anchoring the bird to the tree-side whilst working.



The Flickers move more into the valley areas from the Coast Range Hills around late Sept/early Oct, moving in right around when the Kingbirds leave for down south. Thereafter, they'll be here through the winter until pretty close to the time of arrival of our

Kingbirds again. This is called "partially migratory," meaning on a more localized level, as opposed to "migratory," meaning to go to a different part of the world for a time.

Below, notice the Flicker foot: two toes in front and two in back make it possible to climb on vertical surfaces. But Northern Flickers also hop along the ground, which is unusual for most woodpeckers--and in this fella's case, it was his undoing!



At left, look at the lovely, colorful salmon-orange undersides of the wings. Yellow-shafted ones have a beautiful golden color here. When I was a kid all bird books considered these as different species, with the yellows being outnumbered considerably. When I used to shoot these for Grandma, I found maybe 1 yellows for every 7 reds that I "harvested." Now they're both "lumped" as *Northern Flickers*, due to interbreeding betwixt these two in mid-west regions.