

Northern Flicker

(Colaptes auratus)

By Ellen Horowitz



NORTHERN FLICKER (RED-SHAFTED SUBSPECIES) BY DEB VOGEL

It sounded like a handsaw drawn back and forth across a board, only louder. Curious, I left the trout creek where I was fishing to find out what was making the strange noise. At the edge of the woods I located a weathered larch snag, where two young northern flickers were noisily calling from the entrance of their nest cavity.

IDENTIFICATION The northern flicker is a common woodpecker and year-round Montana resident. The off-white belly has dark spots, and a black crescent marks the chest. A flying flicker can be easily identified by its flashing white rump. Vivid colors beneath the wings and tail readily identify it as either the red-shafted (western) or yellow-shafted (eastern) subspecies. The yellow-shafted has a brown rather than a gray face and a red crescent on the neck nape. Males are distinguished from females by their red (red-shafted subspecies) or black (yellow-shafted subspecies) “mustache” stripe. Flickers are 12 to 13 inches long.

RANGE Flickers live in open woodland habitats that include urban and suburban neighborhoods. According to Dan Casey, Northern Rockies coordinator for the American Bird Conservancy in Kalispell, the red-shafted

subspecies appears across most of Montana. Yellow-shafted flickers can occur anywhere in the state but are more common in the east. The subspecies often interbreed.

HABITS Unlike most woodpeckers, which use trees, the northern flicker forages primarily on the ground, using its long, slightly down-curved bill to probe for ants. The long tongue, extending 1.6 inches beyond the end of the bill, is covered with sticky saliva that collects ants scurrying aboveground or in subterranean tunnels. Biologists have found more than 2,000 ants in the stomachs of some flickers. During fall and winter, the birds add seeds and berries to their diet.

COURTSHIP AND NESTING Courtship begins in late March or early April, when the males establish territories by drumming on trees and other resonating surfaces—including, much to the annoyance of homeowners, house siding and roof flashing. The “wika” mating dance, named for the bird’s call, involves an animated choreography of head swaying and tail flaring.

Flickers nest along forest edges. They usually choose snags with decaying heartwood, but also use utility poles, fence posts, and wooden buildings. For roughly two weeks, both sexes excavate the nest cavity to a depth of 12 to 16 inches. The northern flicker is the most prolific egg

layer in the woodpecker family. In an experiment where scientists removed eggs as they were deposited, one flicker laid 71 eggs over a period of 73 days. In natural settings, females lay six or seven eggs.

FAMILY LIFE Both parents share incubation duties during the 11 to 12 days it takes for the eggs to hatch. The parents feed their chicks regurgitated ants over the next 23 days. As the young grow bigger, they also grow louder and more demanding. At three weeks, the hatchlings clamor from the entrance of the nest cavity, each trying to be first in line for food. The loud buzzing can resemble the hum of a beehive; some scientists believe this noise discourages predators. By late June or early July, the birds fledge, but they still remain close to their parents for another few weeks.

ECOLOGICAL INTERACTIONS Northern flickers play an important role in forest environments by providing nesting cavities for species incapable of excavating their own. Buffleheads, American kestrels, and several owl species use old flicker nests. In some parts of the United States, European starlings pose a major threat to flicker populations. This invasive species takes over flicker nests and destroys eggs. Casey says northern flicker populations in Montana appear stable. 🐿️

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