

Black-backed woodpecker

Picoides arcticus By Sneed B. Collard III

SCIENTIFIC NAME *Picus* is Latin for woodpecker, from a legend in which the enchantress Circe turned Picus, the son of Saturn, into a woodpecker; *-oides* is Greek for “resembling,” so *Picoides* means “woodpecker-like.” The word *arcticus* is Latin for northern or arctic.

three toes rather than four, and males have stunning yellow crowns instead of the traditional woodpecker red. A smattering of white on its back distinguishes the American three-toed, another Montana native woodpecker, from its all-black-backed cousin.

SOUND

The black-backed’s staccato drumming often reveals its presence in a burned forest, especially when the bird is staking

beetle larvae,” says Dick Hutto, previously director of the University of Montana’s Avian Science Center. “Most woodpeckers are getting bark beetles and stuff, but black-backed woodpeckers are digging in deeper to get the bigger larvae.”

BREEDING

Both males and females participate in excavating the nest hole, incubating the eggs, and feeding the ravenous young a steady diet of larval and adult insects. Typically, the female lays three or four white, oval eggs. The young leave the nest three to four weeks after hatching, usually from early June to early July.

Interestingly, only the black-backed, American three-toed, and hairy woodpeckers have the ability to dig fresh nest cavities in the cement-hard wood of freshly charred trees.

KEYSTONE IMPORTANCE

The black-backed woodpecker serves as a keystone species by creating critical nest holes for other cavity-nesting birds. These other species enjoy high nesting success where fire has cleared out chipmunks, squirrels, and other small mammals that prey on eggs and hatchlings. Eventually, black-backed holes serve as homes for a wide variety of wildlife—including mammals and other woodpeckers (see “Lewis’s woodpecker,” *Montana Outdoors*, March-April 2022).

CONSERVATION

Scientists don’t consider the black-backed a threatened species, but because the bird lives in remote areas, little is known about its population dynamics. Salvage logging reduces suitable habitat for this woodpecker species. The permanent loss or degradation of northern forests from climate change also could harm populations. But for now, the increase in forest fires across the bird’s western range is providing additional habitat. 🐿️

At first glance the newly burned forest looked devoid of life, with acres of charred dead trees standing like silent sentinels on the slopes. Still, my son Braden tapped a key on his smartphone and raised a Bluetooth speaker over his head. A second later, the recording of a woodpecker drumming in rapid-fire staccato burst across the landscape. Braden let it play for a few moments and then turned it off.

“There!” I shouted, as a dark shape swooped down the mountain and landed in a dead tree above us. Our hearts racing, we lifted our binoculars to admire a bird that was not only incredibly handsome, but a key to bringing this burned forest back to life: the black-backed woodpecker.

APPEARANCE

The black-backed woodpecker dresses to suit its name, sporting a solid, charcoal-colored topcoat that makes it almost invisible against the charred trunks of trees. Only from the side or in flight does the bird reveal its white throat and speckled black-and-white breast. The black-backed and the closely related American three-toed woodpecker stand out from all other U.S. woodpeckers in that they have

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