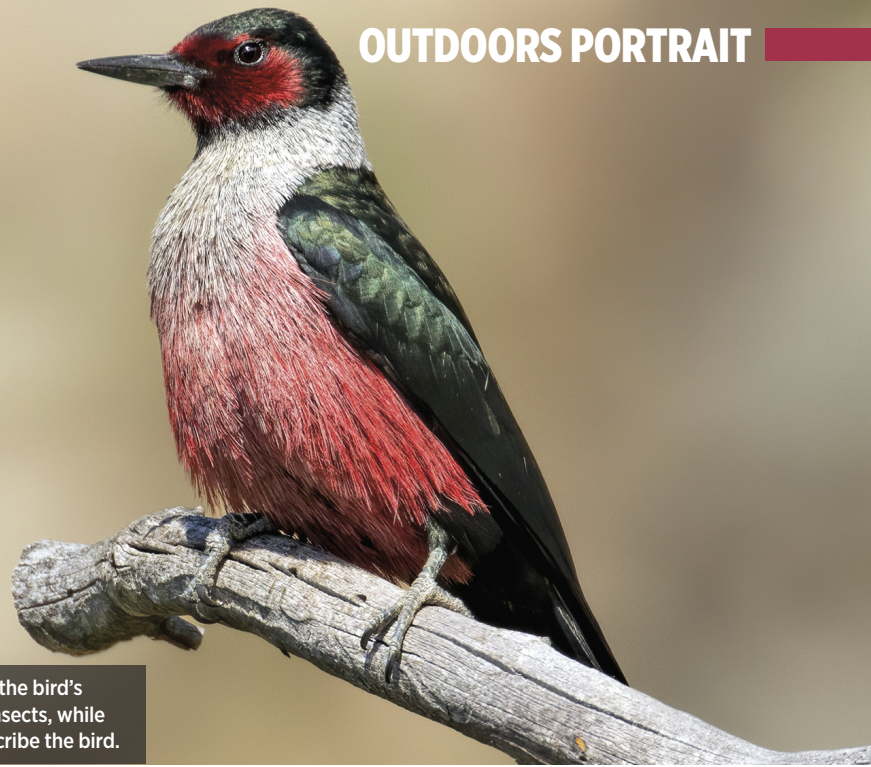


Lewis's Woodpecker

Melanerpes lewis

By Sneed B. Collard III



SCIENTIFIC NAME *Melanerpes* is Greek for “black creeper,” referring to the bird’s dark coloration and the way it creeps around tree trunks searching for insects, while *lewis* derives from explorer Meriwether Lewis, the first westerner to describe the bird.

A couple of years ago, my son and I went hiking with University of Montana biologist Dick Hutto into the 14-year-old Black Mountain burn area south of Missoula. Our mission? To see and photograph a Williamson’s sapsucker nest, and on this bright, sunny day we had no trouble finding one. With their dead trees and abundant insect life, burns are known to attract woodpecker species. As we walked, we also saw northern flickers, and hairy and downy woodpeckers. Suddenly, a bird with a dark back and pink breast flashed by us and landed on a nearby snag. We all looked at each other, astonished. It was a bird none of us had expected, but perhaps we should have. This, after all, was one of Montana’s most surprising species: the Lewis’s woodpecker.

APPEARANCE

Lewis’s woodpeckers sport a “watermelon” color scheme unique among North American woodpeckers. A saturated pink, almost red, breast and face contrast sharply with a dark greenish back, wings, and head that can look black in shaded or overcast conditions. A stylish silver collar keeps the bird properly dressed for all occasions. At just under 11 inches long, the Lewis’s fits solidly into the “medium-sized” bird category, but it is larger than most U.S. woodpeckers. Juveniles usually lack the stunning pink coloration of adults.

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SOUND

Lewis’s woodpeckers make a variety of harsh or buzzy, often repeating, calls. These range from almost crowlike squawks to squeakier, shorter pips similar to those of hairy and downy woodpeckers. In contrast to most other woodpeckers, the Lewis’s is a weak drummer, and according to some scientists it may often use vocalizations in lieu of drumming to advertise for mates.

HABITAT

University of Montana avian ecologist Megan Fyelling, who has studied Lewis’s woodpeckers extensively, describes their habitat as “big snags (cavities, perches) with an open canopy and a shrubby understory.” This primarily includes open ponderosa pine and mature, riparian cottonwood stands with plenty of dead or partially dead trees. As my son and I discovered with Dick Hutto, however, they will move into burn areas once the dead trees have softened and a healthy shrub layer has grown up.

FEEDING

Lewis’s woodpeckers glean insects from trees and the ground, eat fruit when it is available, and often cache nuts and seeds in cracks and crevices for later use. One thing that sets the Lewis’s apart from other woodpeckers is its reliance on hawking, or flycatching. A Lewis’s will perch on a branch and make repeated sallies to catch flying

insects. “They have broad wings and are very maneuverable in the air, which allows them to catch their insect prey,” Fyelling explains. The bird’s extra-wide “gape” (beak opening) also aids in prey capture.

BREEDING

Unlike most woodpeckers, Lewis’s usually cannot drill and excavate entirely new nesting holes for themselves. They can enlarge and “clean up” a cavity but rely on natural cavities or those made by other species. Males and females both incubate eggs and contribute about equally to raising their young. They usually produce one brood of six or seven chicks per breeding season.

MIGRATION

Year-round populations of Lewis’s woodpeckers inhabit forested, mountainous areas of the West Coast and most southwestern states. In Montana, the species spends only the breeding season here, arriving in May and migrating south by the end of September.

CONSERVATION

The Lewis’s woodpecker has shown population declines in many areas, making it a species of concern. Its particular need for mature, rotten trees leaves it vulnerable to human activities such as salvage logging, firewood collecting, and cattle grazing. Insecticide use and land clearing may also harm populations. 🐼