



Volume 25/Issue 3 Woodpeckers November 2011



Photo courtesy Mike Morrison ©

The WOODPECKER Family

“Tap, tap, tap, tap-tap, tap” is the telltale sound of a woodpecker. If you have been

in the woods, you have probably heard or seen a member of the woodpecker family. This large group of birds is found everywhere there are trees, except Australia. Twenty-two different woodpeckers live in North America.

Woodpeckers are easy to recognize as they hitch their way up tree trunks. Some woodpeckers even hang upside-down on branches! Several things make woodpeckers such good climbers. Unlike other birds, woodpeckers have feet with two toes pointing forward and two toes pointing backward. This is called a “zygodactyl” (zEYE-go-DAC-till) foot. Each toe has a long, curved, sharp claw to help hold on to bark.

A woodpecker’s tail is also specialized for climbing. It helps support the bird when it climbs. The tail also acts as a brace when the woodpecker hammers on wood. All the tail feathers are stiff. The two middle tail feathers are pointed. They are reinforced by ridges running along the feather. Inward-curving barbs also strengthen these feathers. Wide pelvic bones with strong muscles move and hold the tail as the bird climbs.

So, what’s the big deal with climbing trees? Woodpeckers are insect eaters and trees are full of the insects they like to eat. Ants, wood-boring beetles, termites, and many other insects can be found in and on trees. Many trees also produce fruits, berries, and seeds that woodpeckers eat in the winter. You could say that a tree is the perfect pantry for a woodpecker.



Photo courtesy Christopher Christie

Woodpeckers look for their food all over tree trunks and branches. They even listen for insects living inside a tree. They use their amazing tongue to grab insects wherever they find them. A woodpecker’s tongue is very sticky. It also has barbs on the end to help it catch insects. Woodpeckers have a unique structure that lets the bird stick its tongue out almost five inches! This is called the “hyoid” (HI-yoid) apparatus. It is made up of two bones covered in muscle. The hyoid apparatus slides around the skull to extend the tongue. This helps the bird capture insects hiding inside a tree.

Woodpeckers make cavities in trees for roosting at night and for nesting. The cavity entrance is usually narrow and then opens into a deep chamber. Wood chips on the bottom cushion the one to six white eggs during incubation. Baby woodpeckers quickly outgrow their nest cavity. They leave about a month after hatching. Woodpeckers usually do not re-use a nest, but old woodpecker nests are used by many different animals.



Photo courtesy Mike Morrison ©



BE OUTSIDE
IDAHO CHILDREN IN NATURE

Feed the birds!

With winter coming, now is the perfect time to put some bird feeders in your yard. Feeding wildlife is usually not a good thing to do. Birds, however, are different. Instead of becoming dependent on feeders, birds include a yard with feeders in their daily search for food. If the feeders are empty, the birds move on to other food sources.

You can buy bird feeders or build your own. Building a bird feeder is a fun family project. The library or Internet are good places to find bird feeder plans. Make several kinds of feeders to feed different birds.

Hopper, tube, platform, and ground feeders

will attract birds such as chickadees, house finches, goldfinches, juncos, mourning doves, and California quail. Good foods for birds include black-oil sunflower seed, millet, nyger thistle, and safflower seed.

If you want to attract woodpeckers, you will need a suet feeder. Find a dry log that is about four inches in diameter and 16 inches long. With an adults' help, drill four to six one and one half inch holes in different places on the log. Make the holes about an inch deep. Screw a metal eye or hook into the top of the log so you can hang it from a wire on a branch. Fill the holes with the suet mixture shown below and hang it up in a tree. Downy and hairy woodpeckers love suet and it might attract chickadees and nuthatches too.



Winter Bird Suet

- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 pound lard | 1c. mixed bird seed |
| 1c. yellow cornmeal | 1c. sunflower seeds |
| 1c. rolled oats | 1c. chunky peanut butter |

1. With an adults' help, melt the lard.
2. Add the other ingredients
3. Mix well---it will be messy!
4. Add to log feeder



You can also use the suet recipe to make balls. Take some nylon twine and make a ball of suet around it. Refrigerate the balls and then hang them from a branch. Old yogurt cups can be used as molds to make balls. Put the twine in the cup leaving a length hanging out, fill the cup with the suet mixture and refrigerate. Take the ball out of the yogurt cup and hang it from a branch. Enjoy feeding the birds. You might be amazed at what you see in your own backyard!

Watching Woodpeckers

Ten different kinds of woodpeckers live in Idaho. Some of them live in very special habitats. Others live in many places, including towns. Watch for these woodpeckers in your area:

Watching



Woodpeckers



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Lewis's Woodpecker

Lewis's Woodpecker was named after Meriwether Lewis. The Lewis and Clark expedition found this bird in July 1805. This is one of Idaho's most unusual woodpeckers. Instead of finding food on trees, Lewis's woodpecker catches flying insects in the air. They live in open places with large trees. The birds perch in trees, watching for flying insects. Lewis's woodpecker is 10-inches long. It has a greenish-black back, gray chest, pink belly, and a red face. They migrate to the southwestern United States in the winter. During the winter, Lewis's woodpecker eats fruits and seeds.

Pileated Woodpecker

This is the largest woodpecker in North America. It is the size of a crow. They have a black body, flaming red crest, and black-and-white stripe on the face and neck. This makes them easy to identify. You also know that they are nearby when you find the large oval holes they excavate to find food. Carpenter ants make up to 60 percent of their diet. They also eat the larvae of wood-boring beetles. Pileated woodpeckers live in forests with large trees. While they are shy birds, their loud, laughing calls often give them away. The cartoon character Woody Woodpecker is a pileated woodpecker.



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Terry Gray ©



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Downy Woodpecker

This five to six-inch bird is North America's smallest woodpecker. Because it is so small, it can find food on small plants that large woodpeckers cannot use. The downy woodpecker is black-and-white. It lives in open woodlands, city parks, and neighborhoods with trees. Listen for its loud whinnying calls. Male and female downy woodpeckers look the same except males have a red patch on the back of their head.

Red-naped Sapsucker

Sapsuckers do not really suck sap from trees. They make neat rows of shallow holes in trees like aspen or cottonwood. As the sap oozes out of the holes, the sapsucker eats the sap. Special bristles on the end of its tongue hold the sap so the bird can eat it. Sapsuckers also eat insects that get caught in the sticky sap. Sapsuckers eat the sap and inner bark of over 280 different kinds of plants. Idaho's most common sapsucker is the red-naped sapsucker. They are a small black-and-white woodpecker with a red cap and chin. In Idaho, they live in forests along rivers and streams during the summer.



Photo courtesy
Mike Morrison ©

Northern Flicker

The flicker is a 12-inch brown bird with black spots on its belly and black stripes on its back. It is common in many habitats around Idaho. Unlike most woodpeckers, flickers spend a lot of time on the ground. Ants, ant larvae, and ground beetles are their favorite foods. In the winter, flickers also eat fruit such as berries. Flickers get their name from their loud "flicka, flicka, flicka" calls made in the spring. This woodpecker is migratory. It leaves parts of Idaho during the winter. When they fly, look for a white rump patch and reddish-orange under the wings.

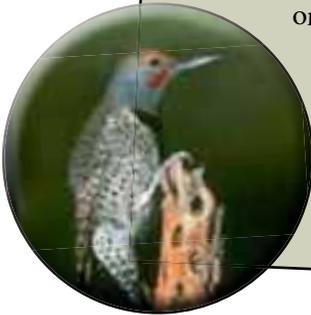


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Dr. Lloyd Glenn Ingles
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Hairy Woodpecker

The black-and-white hairy woodpecker looks like a large downy woodpecker. They even live in the same places. Just like the male downy, male hairy woodpeckers have a red patch on the back of the head. These woodpeckers have large beaks that are almost as long as the bird's head. Hairy woodpeckers search for insects on the trunks of trees. They are known to have a "sweet beak" and will eat sap or visit hummingbird feeders in the summer.



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Woodpeckers & Wildlife

Woodpeckers make cavities in trees for nesting. They also make cavities for shelter at night. While these roosting holes are used again, most woodpecker nests are not. These old nests can provide shelter for other animals. In Idaho, almost 60 different animals use old woodpecker nests for shelter and raising young. Birds like mountain bluebirds, wood ducks, and screech owls use old woodpecker nests. Mammals use them, too. Squirrels, bats, and pine martens use old woodpecker nests to raise young or as a



Photo courtesy Mike Morrison ©

den. Old cavities are also important as night-time shelter for small birds like nuthatches. Winter storms will sometimes bring many of these birds into an old woodpecker cavity at night. Over 100 pygmy nuthatches were once discovered sharing a single cavity!

Woodpeckers do not just provide shelter for other animals. They also provide food. The large feeding holes of pileated woodpeckers attract smaller birds. They eat the insects disturbed by the woodpecker. Sapsucker holes attract hummingbirds which eat the sap. Other birds feed on insects attracted to the sap.

Woodpeckers are also very important in controlling insect pests. Insects like carpenter ants, tent caterpillars, termites, and bark beetles can cause serious problems. Large numbers of them can damage forests, crops, and our homes. Woodpeckers help keep these insect pests in check.

Hammer-Heads

Woodpeckers are best known for banging their beaks on trees. They do this for courtship, finding food, and making nest cavities. During courtship, both the male and female drum their beaks against things that make noise---the more noise, the better! Hollow logs, dry branches, metal lamp posts, and even old tractors have been used by courting woodpeckers. All this noise is the woodpecker's idea of singing. It attracts a mate and helps the birds find and maintain their territory. Woodpeckers that are feeding or excavating, do not make much noise. This is the quiet "tap, tap, tap" sound you may hear in the woods.

All this hammering makes you wonder how woodpeckers can bang their heads without getting a major headache. Woodpeckers

can hit a tree 22 times per second. Scientists have discovered that woodpeckers hammer with a force more than 1,000 times the force of gravity. Ouch---that does not sound like fun!

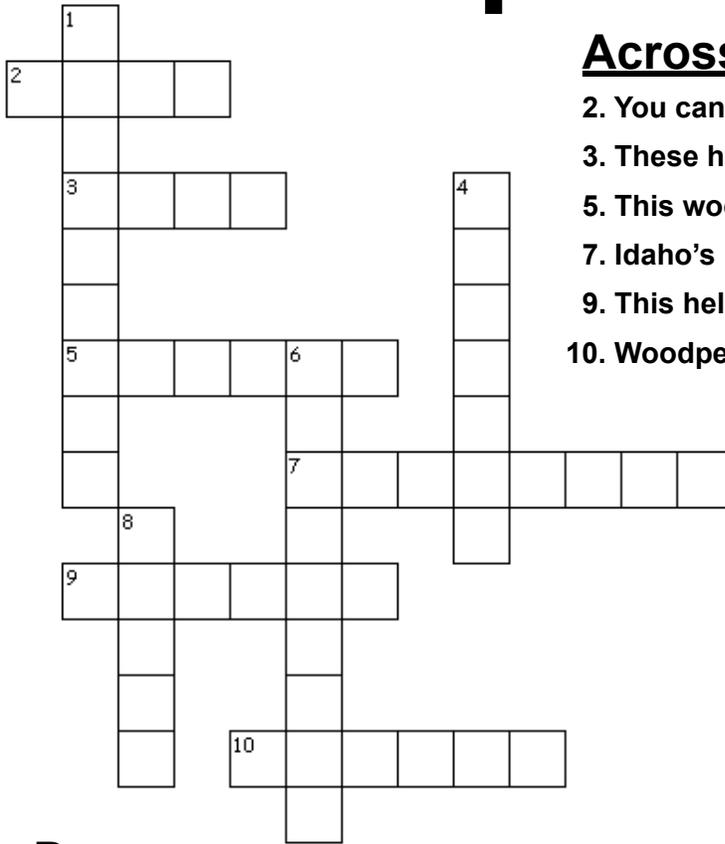
These birds have some special adaptations that let them bang away without hurting their heads. Woodpecker brains fit tightly in their skull. This helps prevent the brain from moving around when the woodpecker is hammering. If you hit your head, your brain can move around and hit the inside your skull. This is what happens when you get a concussion. That's not good. Since woodpecker brains cannot move in their skull, they do not have to worry about concussions.

Woodpeckers also have a lot of shock absorbers. The muscles behind the beak and in the neck help to lessen the impact of the hammering. So does the spongy bone behind the beak. While the beak is hard, it is covered by a flexible layer made of keratin. Your fingernails are made of keratin. Woodpeckers move their heads perfectly straight up-and-down when they hammer on a tree. This helps the force of hitting a tree go equally around the bird's head and neck. Together, all these things add up to make woodpeckers, nature's perfect hammer-heads!



Photo courtesy Mike Morrison ©

Woodpecker Puzzle



Across

2. You can make this to feed woodpeckers.
3. These help woodpeckers cling to trees.
5. This woodpecker catches insects in the air.
7. Idaho's largest woodpecker.
9. This helps woodpeckers reach insects hiding in trees.
10. Woodpeckers can hit a tree 22 times per _____.

Down

1. This is the only continent you will not find woodpeckers.
4. This woodpecker likes to eat ants on the ground.
6. This woodpecker laps up the sap from holes it drills in trees.
8. Idaho's smallest woodpecker.

WORDS

Australia
 Downy
 Flicker
 Lewis's
 Pileated
 Sapsucker
 Second
 Suet
 Toes
 Tongue

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