

NORTHERN FLICKER - COLAPTES AURATUS

Taxonomy: Kingdom: Animalia Phylum: Chordata Class: Aves Order: Piciformes Family: Picidae Genus: Colaptes Species: C. auratus

Habitat:

Biomes: Look for Northern Flickers in woodlands, forest edges, and open fields with scattered trees, as well as city parks and suburbs. In the western mountains they occur in most forest types, including burned forests, all the way up to treeline. You can also find them in wet areas such as streamside woods, flooded swamps, and marsh edges.

Distribution:

In US: It is native to most of North America, parts of Central America, Cuba, and the Cayman Islands, and is one of the few woodpecker species that migrate.

In Other Countries: NONE

Holistic Description: Northern Flickers are large, brown woodpeckers with a gentle expression and handsome black-scalloped plumage. On walks, don't be surprised if you scare one up from the ground. It's not where you'd expect to find a woodpecker, but flickers eat mainly ants and beetles, digging for them with their unusual, slightly curved bill. When they fly you'll see a flash of color in the wings – yellow if you're in the East, red if you're in the West – and a bright white flash on the rump.

Species Richness: 11 SUBSPECIES

Population Dynamic: CHECK THREATS

Evolution and Systematics:

Evolution: Several fossil specimens are known from Pleistocene deposits in Florida.

Systematics: Geographic variation in the predominant color of remiges and rectrices, forming either “yellow-shafted” or “red-shafted” populations, is well known. Yellow-shafted populations occur in far northern and eastern North America and some of the West Indies. Save for the Sonoran and Mojave Deserts and Baja California peninsula, where the Gilded Flicker occurs, red-shafted forms occupy western North America and mainland Mexico south through northern Central America. In general, body size increases northward, particularly among yellow-shafted populations. As with many other North American bird species, the darkest, most heavily saturated populations occur in the Pacific Northwest, the grayest in the Great Basin. In both yellow-shafted and red-shafted meta-groups, subspecies with the heaviest dorsal barring and roundest wings occur to the south.

Number of Species: 11 SUBSPECIES

Number of Genera: 11 SUBSPECIES

Physical Characteristics:

Size and Length: Length: 11.0-12.2 in (28-31 cm) Weight: 3.9-5.6 oz (110-160 g)

Wingspan: 16.5-20.1 in (42-51 cm)

Coloration: Flickers appear brownish overall with a white rump patch that's conspicuous in flight and often visible when perched. The undersides of the wing and tail feathers are bright yellow, for eastern birds, or red, in western birds. With a closer look you'll see the brown plumage is richly patterned with black spots, bars, and crescents.

General Body Features: Flickers are fairly large woodpeckers with a slim, rounded head, slightly down curved bill, and long, flared tail that tapers to a point.

Special Features of the Body: The woodpecker's beak is strong and sturdy, with a chisel-like tip for drilling holes in wood. Woodpeckers use their stiff tail as a prop while climbing in order to balance themselves.

Special Features of the Head and Sensory Organs: Woodpecker tongues, however, vary based on their diet. Some species have a tongue that is longer than their bill in order to extract insects from a hole. Woodpeckers also have a lengthened hyoid apparatus (bones, muscle, cartilage connected to the tongue), allowing their tongue to extend incredible lengths.

Woodpeckers have bristly feathers over their nostrils to prevent inhalation of wood particles as they chisel.

Dentition: BEAK/LAMELLAE/GIZZARD

Special Features of the Limbs and Digits: Their strong “zygodactyl” feet are specifically adapted to cling and grasp onto trees. Two toes face forward, and two face backward. Most songbirds have three forward-facing toes, and one backward-facing. They may peck a total of 8,000-12,000 pecks per day! Luckily, a woodpecker's skull is built to absorb this shock. Sinewy attachments at the base of a woodpecker's bill and around the brain help to minimize damage to the brain.

Any Special Internal Anatomy: Woodpeckers are often characterized as “chisel-billed” because they peck into living or dead wood to find grubs or build a nest. Cells in the tips of their beaks are constantly replaced, preventing them from wearing

down over time. The woodpecker's long tongue has a barbed tip and is covered in sticky saliva. These features help the bird capture and extract insects from the holes the bird drills.

Sexual Dimorphisms: Males are significantly larger than females in all measures, but only by about 1–2%. Males weigh significantly more than females.

Differences Between Juvenile Stage and Adult: Juveniles closely resemble adults when they fledge.

Behavior:

Diurnal, Nocturnal, or Crepuscular: Diurnal

Activity: Northern Flickers don't act like typical woodpeckers. They mainly forage on the ground, sometimes among sparrows and blackbirds. When flushed, flickers often perch erect on thin horizontal branches rather than hitching up or around a tree trunk. Flickers do fly like most woodpeckers do, rising and falling smoothly as they intersperse periods of flapping with gliding. Early in spring and summer, rivals may face off in a display sometimes called a “fencing duel,” while a prospective mate looks on. Two birds face each other on a branch, bills pointed upward, and bob their heads in time while drawing a loop or figure-eight pattern in the air, often giving rhythmic wicka calls at the same time.

Locomotion: Hops slowly for short distances on ground when foraging, occasionally running short distances before hopping again. Hops on tree branches, limbs, and vertical trunks, moving up, down, or laterally with short hops and using stiffened rectrices as a brace when clinging to trunk. If distance between foraging patches are great, it flies between them. Sustained flight has an undulating trace, termed “flap-bounding” which is typical of woodpeckers. Bursts of wing-flapping alternate with non-flapping phases (bound) during which wings are folded against body.

Communication and Perception: Northern Flickers make a loud, rolling rattle with a piercing tone that rises and falls in volume several times. The song lasts 7 or 8 seconds and is quite similar to the call of the Pileated Woodpecker. You'll hear it in the spring and early summer, while pairs are forming and birds are establishing their territories.

Home Range: Male and female vigorously defend the space around their nest tree with Long-calling, drumming, displays, and Wicka dances but do not defend a feeding territory probably because their food sources are not economically defendable. Distances between nests are determined by agonistic behavior but also depend on snag density. In riparian woodlands with many snags in western Nebraska, the average nearest-neighbor nest distances among 19 pairs of Yellow-shafted Flickers was 102.7 m.

Degree of Sociality: Not social but may forage in loosely structured groups at any time of year; observed 20 foraging together in a corn field thinly covered with snow. Ten males foraged together on a park lawn in Detroit, Michigan.

Level of Aggression: Both sexes defend nest trees and mates aggressively. Agonistic behavior is highly ritualized in flicker “dance”. Typically, two birds of same sex pair off in mock “fencing duels,” using their bills as “foils,” while a member of the opposite sex looks on. This dance is prevalent during early phases of the breeding cycle (territory establishment, pair formation, and nest-site selection), but is also seen infrequently and at lower intensities at other times. Displays that comprise the dance are clearly agonistic and function in territorial defense, but territorial establishment and pair formation are so integrated in flickers that these displays may also play a role in pair formation; this remains poorly understood.

Migration: Resident or short-distance migrant. Flickers leave the northern parts of their range to winter in the southern U.S. Birds that breed farther south typically stay put for the winter.

Predators:

Predators: Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, Northern Harrier, Flying Squirrel, Red Squirrel, Short-Tailed Weasel, American Mink, Fisher, Black Bear, Raccoon, American Crow, Fish Crow, Blue Jay, Rat Snake, and Bull Snake

Anti-Predator Defenses: Northern Flicker does not appear to respond strongly to avian or reptilian predators; e.g., rarely mobs hawks, and one adult, confronted with a bull snake on a branch near its nest cavity, made only tentative flights and bill pokes at the snake. Defends nest against squirrels by poking out of the cavity entrance and pecking the mammal, or pecking and diving at the squirrel on the tree trunk.

Diet and Nutrition:

Adult Diet: Northern Flickers eat mainly insects, especially ants and beetles that they gather from the ground. They also eat fruits and seeds, especially in winter. Other invertebrates eaten include flies, butterflies, moths, and snails. Flickers also eat berries and seeds, especially in winter, including poison oak and ivy, dogwood, sumac, wild cherry and grape, bayberries, hackberries, and elderberries, and sunflower and thistle seeds.

Juvenile Diet: ^^^^^

Special Adaptations for Getting Prey: Flickers often go after ants underground (where the nutritious larvae live), hammering at the soil the way other woodpeckers drill into wood. They've been seen breaking into cow patties to eat insects living within. Their tongues can dart out 2 inches beyond the end of the bill to snare prey.

Reproduction:

Mode of Reproduction: Monogamous

Mating System: Usually socially monogamous but up to 5% of the population annually is polyandrous at Riske Creek, British Columbia.

Mating Season: May to August

Courtship: Difficult to distinguish because courtship and territorial defense are integrated behaviors. The "wicka dance" seems to function also in courtship because it is intensified between 2 members of same sex when a member of opposite sex arrives and looks on. Also, low-intensity dances accompanied by soft Wicka calls occur between members of a pair. Ritualized tapping occurs between male and female as they choose a nest site and could be considered a courtship behavior. Mate guarding not reported.

Territoriality: HOME RANGE

Mating: Pairs usually copulate on a horizontal branch near nest cavity. Female squats low, male mounts and spreads his wings over her. Copulation lasts a few seconds; male then usually quickly leaves nest area, female flies to nest cavity.

Nest Placement: Northern Flickers usually excavate nest holes in dead or diseased tree trunks or large branches. In northern North America look for nests in trembling aspens, which are susceptible to a heartrot that makes for easy excavation. Unlike many woodpeckers, flickers often reuse cavities that they or another species excavated in a previous year. Nests are generally placed 6-15 feet off the ground, but on rare occasions can be over 100 feet high. Northern Flickers have been known to nest in old burrows of Belted Kingfishers or Bank Swallows.

Nest Description: Both sexes help with nest excavation. The entrance hole is about 3 inches in diameter, and the cavity is 13-16 inches deep. The cavity widens at bottom to make room for eggs and the incubating adult. Inside, the cavity is bare except for a bed of wood chips for the eggs and chicks to rest on. Once nestlings are about 17 days old, they begin clinging to the cavity wall rather than lying on the floor.

Egg-Laying: Clutch Size: 5-8 eggs Number of Broods: 1 brood Egg Length: 0.8-1.4 in (1.9-3.6 cm) Egg Width: 0.6-1.3 in (1.6-3.3 cm) Incubation Period: 11-13 days Nestling Period: 24-27 days Egg Description: All white.

Hatching and Incubation/Gestation: Naked, pink skin, a sharp egg tooth at the tip of bill; eyes closed, movements clumsy.

Development: Altricial. No feathers; eyes closed; skin bare; bill, tarsus, and feet flesh-colored to pink; white fleshy fold at jaw hinge; white egg tooth. Hatchlings aggregate on floor of nest cavity, crane their heads weakly when a parent enters nest. Mean body mass at hatching 5.46 g in Iowa.

Parental Care: Presumably begins shortly after hatching. Pharynx of adult expands to form a crop, which is engorged, particularly with ant larvae, when adult returns to nest. Young fed by regurgitation. Both sexes feed young, usually with every visit to nest; relative numbers of nest visits by male and female presumably reflect relative contributions to feeding.

Lifespan: The oldest yet known "yellow-shafted" northern flicker lived to be at least 9 years 2 months old, and the oldest yet known "red-shafted" northern flicker lived to be at least 8 years 9 months old.

Conservation:

Official Federal Status: Least Concern

Special Statuses in Individual States: NONE

Threats: Northern Flickers are widespread and common, but numbers decreased by almost 1.5% per year between 1966 and 2012, resulting in a cumulative decline of 49%, according to the North American Breeding Bird Survey. Partners in Flight estimates a global breeding population of 9 million with 78% spending some part of the year in the U.S., 42% in Canada, and 8% in Mexico. They rate a 10 out of 20 on the Continental Concern Score and are listed as a Common Bird in Steep Decline. They are not listed on the 2014 State of the Birds Report.

Conservation Efforts: ^^^^^^

Extra Facts:

1. Although it can climb up the trunks of trees and hammer on wood like other woodpeckers, the Northern Flicker prefers to find food on the ground. Ants are its main food, and the flicker digs in the dirt to find them. It uses its long barbed tongue to lap up the ants.
2. The red-shafted and yellow-shafted forms of the Northern Flicker formerly were considered different species. The two forms hybridize extensively in a wide zone from Alaska to the panhandle of Texas. A hybrid often has some traits from each of the two forms and some traits that are intermediate between them. The Red-shafted Flicker also hybridizes with the Gilded Flicker, but less frequently.
3. The Northern Flicker is one of the few North American woodpeckers that is strongly migratory. Flickers in the northern parts of their range move south for the winter, although a few individuals often stay rather far north.

4. Northern Flickers generally nest in holes in trees like other woodpeckers. Occasionally, they've been found nesting in old, earthen burrows vacated by Belted Kingfishers or Bank Swallows.
5. Like most woodpeckers, Northern Flickers drum on objects as a form of communication and territory defense. In such cases, the object is to make as loud a noise as possible, and that's why woodpeckers sometimes drum on metal objects. One Northern Flicker in Wyoming could be heard drumming on an abandoned tractor from a half-mile away.
6. The oldest known yellow-shafted form of the Northern Flicker was a male and was at least 9 years, 2 months old when he was found in Florida. The oldest red-shafted form of Northern Flicker lived to be at least 8 years, 9 months old.

Notable Species:

1. *C. a. luteus* Bangs, 1898.
2. *C. a. auratus* Linnaeus, 1758.
3. *C. a. cafer* Gmelin, 1788.
4. *C. a. collaris* Vigors, 1829.
5. *C. a. rufipileus* Ridgway, 1876.
6. *C. a. canescens* Brodkorb, 1935.
7. *C. a. mexicanus* Swainson, 1827.
8. *C. a. nanus* Griscom, 1934.
9. *C. a. mexicanoides* Lafresnaye, 1844.
10. *C. a. chrysocaulosus* Gundlach, 1858.
11. *C. a. gundlachi* Cory, 1886.