1-30-1972

II. Our Woodpeckers

Theodore M. Sperry

30 Jan 72
Pittsburg Headlight - Sun
Kenneth L. Simms' col.

II Our Woodpeckers

Of all of Dickey birds which ~~master~~ Wants-to-~~Know-~~ ~~Curiosity~~ is likely to see around the yard, perhaps no group is more easily recognized than the woodpeckers. Even separating the different kinds from each other is not very difficult.

Not all birds working about tree trunks are woodpeckers, and we shall have something more to say about those others later. but the woodpeckers with their rather long bills and stiff straight tail feathers, which they use to prop themselves against the tree trunks, make ~~a~~ a rather distinctive group.

Probably the commonest of the woodpeckers is the Downy Woodpecker, which is the smallest of the group, scarcely larger than a House Sparrow. Its back and wings are black with scattered white spots, and a white streak down the back between the wings, especially noticable when it flies. The male has a small red patch ~~on~~ on the ~~the~~ back of the head, while in the female this area is black. Because of their small size, and their relatively small bill (for a woodpecker) these birds are often found on shrubs or the smaller tree branches, but they can be seen on the trunks of large trees also. Sometimes they will be found along roadsides or in weed patches pecking away at the stiff stems of ~~ragweed or other tall~~ ~~long~~ weeds, getting out the insects which bore inside these stems.

Quite similar to the Downy Woodpecker, ~~and much less common~~, is the Hairy Woodpecker, with the same white-spotted black back and wings, the same white stripe down the middle of the back, and the same red patch on the back of the head of the male. However, it is half again as large as the Downy, being about Robin-sized instead of sparrow-sized, and it has a conspicuously ~~larger~~ bigger bill, about one and a quarter inches in length, instead of two-thirds of an inch which the Downy uses. Bigness is about the only conspicuous difference between the two. The Hairy Woodpecker, although much less common than the Downy, still occurs rather regularly, and ~~and~~ wants-to-know can expect to see one every week or so if he is watchful, – perhaps oftener if the Hairy likes that particular neighborhood.

Much the most conspicuous of the common woodpeckers is the Red-headed Woodpecker – in some places very common and in others rather infrequent. The glossy blue-black ~~feathers~~ plush with the large white patches on the wings and bright red head make it unmistakable. Scarcely as large as a Robin, its noisy and sometimes rather pugnacious character makes it a little too conspicuous for some persons.

~~About the size~~ Perhaps slightly larger than the Redhead, and in some ~~[illegible]~~ areas more common, is the much less well known Red-bellied Woodpecker. Its black and white barred ladder-back, or "zebra-back" makes it different from any other bird in this part of the country. The back of the head and neck is entirely red, and in the male the ~~to~~ top of the head also (this is gray in

the female). In spite of its name, Wants-to-know would not see any red belly (unless he had a bird in his hand, when a red patch could be seen between the legs). In behavior and location, the Red-bellied Woodpecker is rather similar to that of the Red-head.

The last of our common woodpeckers, and also the largest, is the Yellow-shafted Flicker. ~~which is also the largest of these~~ Larger than a Blue Jay, and a spotted yellowish brown in color, it is unlike any other woodpecker in this part of the country. Both sexes have a red patch on back of the head, and the male has a rather large black "whisker mark" on each side of the bill, which the female does not have. When the soil is not ~~not~~ frozen, the Flicker spends quite a bit of its time on the ground digging for ants, but it is quite at home in the trees as well, even to perching crosswise on a branch, as well as lengthwise.

There are two other woodpeckers which occasionally occur in this area. One is the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, which is not with us during the summer months. Slightly smaller than the Red-head or the Hairy Woodpecker, it also has a black and white plumage, but is the only ~~wood~~-pecker with a long lengthwise white stripe on a black wing. The red occurs only on the front part of the head, but the male has a ~~red~~ red throat as well, the female a white throat. ~~If Wants-to-know sees~~ As or ~~Ex~~ the Red-bellied Woodpecker, one does not see the yellow belly except when examining the bird in the hand. If Wants-to-know sees this bird once a month during the winter, he is lucky.

The other uncommon woodpecker is the Pileated Woodpecker. This is a very large, spectacular black woodpecker the size of a crow, with large white patches on the wing and a large red crest. I feel lucky if I see it more than two or three times a year. It would probably be more common if we did not take such good care of our trees, since its preference is for large old dead trees, or at least trees with large dead branches which are well burrowed by wood beetles. It prefers to get its food by making large cavities in the sides of dead trunks or the larger limbs of these trees as it digs out the beetles. It's sometimes worth it to leave some of these old trees just to occasionally see the sweeping flight of these spectacular birds.