KANSAS WOODPECKERS

By

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KANSAS WOODPECKERS
by Robert F. Clarke

Woodpeckers are attractive, interesting birds that we can observe all seasons of the year. Their habit of clinging upright on the trunks of trees, along with bold color patterns and generally loud rapping and calls, makes these birds conspicuous. This issue of the Naturalist is devoted to the woodpeckers that normally occur in Kansas; the "rare" woodpeckers are not included. "Corners" of Kansas, particularly the southeast and southwest corners, have occasional reports of species of woodpeckers that are found in neighboring states: Lewis Woodpecker and Williamson's Sapsucker in the southwest and perhaps the Red-cockaded Woodpecker in the southeast. Identification may be facilitated by referring to the drawings along with the written descriptions and recognition characteristics. Some natural history notes are included for each species. Many inexpensive bird field guides that show the birds in color are on the market and every book store or news depot should have one or more on hand. Some of these guides and other references are included at the end of this booklet.

Kansas, with the eight native species of woodpeckers described in this Naturalist, certainly does not hold a corner on the woodpecker market, for the family Picidae is found worldwide, except for the island of Madagascar, the Australian region, some of the Pacific islands, and the polar areas. There are about 180 species of true woodpeckers found throughout this vast area, with the species about evenly divided between the Old and New Worlds. In the United States, there are 20 species, and one more that may be extinct.

Woodpeckers have been given this name because of their foremost trait—pecking at the bark on the sides of trees in search of insects and their larvae and excavating nest cavities in dead trees and dead stubs of limbs of living trees. Adaptations for this behavior have taken the form of modifications of the feet, tail, bill, and tongue; with changes in muscle and skeleton to accommodate these modifications.

Most woodpeckers have four toes; only a few species have three toes. In most birds with four toes, three toes point forward and one points to the rear. In the four-toed woodpecker, however, two of these toes point forward and two to the rear, which makes a more secure grasping device. Extra long claws complement the toe arrangement.

The tail has been modified as a brace to help support the bird by the feather shafts becoming stiff and pointed.

The bill is more or less cylindrical,

Dr. Robert F. Clarke retired as Professor of Biology at Emporia State University in May, 1985, but continues as editor of the Naturalist. The drawings in this issue are by the author. He has been associated in some way with the Naturalist since its inception in 1954.
Tail and foot of a typical woodpecker.

long, and chisel-shaped, allowing the woodpecker to excavate small holes or large nest cavities by repeated hammering of the bill. Firm attachment of the bill and skull bones, along with special muscle development, allows the strong, repetitious blows to be delivered.

An amazing change has been made in the tongue, which has developed into a long, thin structure that can be extended into cavities and burrows where insects or larvae may be, and extracting them by use of barbs at the end of the tongue. When the tongue is retracted into the bill, the extra length is backed up along the inside of the back of the skull. Some woodpeckers, such as the Sapsuckers, have different tongues — not so long and with a brush-like tip; not barbed.

As a group, woodpeckers are beneficial, for they more than compensate for any damage they may cause by the large number of deleterious insects and grubs that they consume. Woodpeckers can detect burrowing insect larvae under the bark of trees and can remove them by drilling a hole directly into the burrow. Holes made by woodpeckers in living trees should be viewed as a beneficial act: not as destruction. Nesting cavities are almost always made in dead trees or dead stubs or tissues of living trees, rather than in the living tissue itself.

Nesting sometimes may be carried on in nest boxes or other man-made cavities, in addition to the cavities constructed by the birds themselves. No nesting material is used in the cavity other than the chips that accrued during the excavating process. The number of eggs varies according to the species, but all are shiny white. When the young birds are ready to fledge, they climb up the inside of the nest cavity wall and out into the bright, new world. Vacant cavities of former woodpecker nests are often used as nesting sites by other birds. Aggressive birds, such as the Starling, have been known to chase woodpeckers away from a cavity before the woodpecker nesting season.

Most woodpeckers fly in a manner
that easily identifies them as woodpeckers. It is an undulating, up-and-down pattern, caused by the bird rising by beating its wings several times; then folding the wings along the body, causing a drop in flight. Another short wing beat series, followed by a wing-fold, is repeated and repeated, resulting in the recognizable woodpecker flight pattern.

Woodpeckers let you know when they are around by loud vocalizations. These calls vary, of course, with different species, from kitten-like chirpings of the Sapsuckers through buzzing mutterings of Downy Woodpeckers to shrill, staccato blasts of the larger forms, which may be heard for a mile or more in otherwise quiet surroundings. It is almost impossible to describe in words the calls of these birds. Roger Tory Peterson has done as good a job as anyone with these and I have based the call descriptions in the "Species Account" for each species on descriptions given by Peterson in A Field Guide to the Birds (east of the Rockies), 1980.

Calls are made to keep in touch with mates and young and to advertise the caller's presence to others as a territorial declaration. Another noise is "drumming," where the woodpecker rattles out a rapid series of bill beats on some resonating surface, such as a hollow limb or metal roof. I well remember how annoying this can be under certain circumstances. A Red-headed Woodpecker had a nest in a large Green Ash tree in our front yard. Our house at that time had a square, high-peaked roof under which was our bedroom. On the point of the roof was located our TV antenna. For a short while, the woodpecker decided to "drum" on the antenna — right at dawn. The construction of the roof acted like the inside of a giant bell, intensifying the sound of that drumming on the metal antenna and projecting it downward onto the sleeping souls below. There was no need for an alarm clock — that clamor cannot be described! I always felt that that woodpecker knew exactly what he was doing!

Undulating pattern of woodpecker flight. Rise with series of wing beats and downward glide with wings folded; then rise with wings flapping and down with folded wings, etc.
RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER (*Melanerpes carolinus*)

**Range:**
U.S.: Eastern half of United States.
Kansas: Entire state, less common in northwest fourth.

**Description:**
Size: length 10 inches, wingspread 18 inches
Color and pattern: Black and white, with conspicuous barring across back and wings. Belly plain white. Crown and nape red; cheeks light, making eye prominent. Tail has spotted center and edge, black otherwise.

**Recognition:**
The red "cap" and nape with black and white bars across the bird's back should characterize the Red-belly. The Sapsucker and Ladder-back both have a black stripe across cheek, whereas the cheek of the Red-Belly is plain. Downy and Hairy have a white, unbarred back. In flight, the Red-bellied Woodpecker shows a white rump patch and a white "window" in each wing. Voice: kwirr, chirr, or chaw; also chiv, chiv. Maybe a muffled, Flicker-like series.

**Habitat:**
Open woodlands, parks, backyards.

**Habits:**
Feeds on a variety of materials: insects from tree bark, suet, bread and other kitchen scraps, and small seeds. This woodpecker will feed on seeds at a regular bird feeder and frequently feeds on the ground.
NORTHERN FLICKER (Colaptes auratus)

      Kansas: Entire state.

Description: Size: length 12 inches, wingspread 20 inches
Color and pattern: Brown, with dark lines across back; head lighter, with dark crown.
      Black neckband "bib." Belly and sides light with many rounded, large spots. Large white
      rump patch. Tail with dark central feathers and light, spotted outer feathers. Male has a
      black (or reddish) mustache. Yellow (or reddish) under wings and tail.

Recognition: Large size, brown color with yellow or reddish under wings and white rump spot (easily
      seen in flight). Spotted belly and habit of feeding on ground will aid. Voice: loud wick
      wick wick, etc., loud klee-yer, and a squeaky flick-a flick-a, etc.

Habitat: Usually in open woodland or urban areas. Nest hollows are built in dead trees or
      telephone poles.

Habits: Spends much time feeding on the ground. Favorite food is ants, but Flickers will eat other
      insects and weed seeds. Noisy bird, with tendency to attack other males of its species on
      sight. Migratory in the northern part of the range.

Remarks: The Red-shafted and Yellow-shafted Flickers were once thought to represent two distinct
      species, but have now been placed together, along with a non-Kansas form, into one
      species category. The Red-shafted form is a more western type and there is a good deal of
      mixing of it and the Yellow-shafted in western Kansas.
RED-HEADED WOODPECKER (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*)

**Range:** U.S.: Entire country, except for western two tiers of states.

*Kansas:* Entire state.

**Description:** Size: length over 9 inches.

*Color and pattern:* Back is black and undersides white, with the whole head and neck bright red in males; less red in females. A white patch is present on wings.

**Recognition:** The red head and neck, with the black and white pattern is unlike any of the other woodpeckers. In flight, white patches on inner rear of wings and white rump patch join to make a conspicuous black and white flashing pattern. Voice: loud *queer* or *queakah*.

**Habitat:** Almost anywhere. Prefers open woods, parks, and bottomlands, but frequents urban areas and open prairies where there are infrequent trees. Migrant, few are seen in winter.

**Habits:** Feeds on insects and acorns (which it stores), occasionally on the ground. Often found on telephone poles and wooden fence posts (may be metal posts) where they "squirrel" around the post or tree, keeping it between the bird and the observer. Fond of "drumming," as well as being loud otherwise.
YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER (*Sphyrapicus varius*)

**Range:** U.S.: Most of the United States, except west coast and parts of the northern and central grasslands.  
Kansas: Fairly common east of the Flint Hills, becoming increasingly scarce westward.

**Description:** Size: length 8 inches.  
Color and pattern: Black and white, with red "forehead." Belly is yellowish. Head is striped with black and white, and back is barred in these colors. A large white patch is evident on upper wing when at rest.

**Recognition:** The striped head and neck and barred back, along with the white wing patch, should be distinctive. Voice: nasal, mewing note, or squeal cheerrr, slurring downward.

**Habitat:** Woodlands, but may be found in parks and urban areas.

**Habits:** This is a "drummer" bird, constantly working holes into trees — usually live ones. The holes exhibit a characteristic horizontal, nicely-spaced series, rather than scattered here and there. These holes bleed, attracting insects upon which the Sapsucker may return and feed, as well as feed upon the oozing sap. The tongue is brush-like for this purpose.
HAIRY WOODPECKER (*Picoides villosus*)
DOWNY WOODPECKER (*Picoides pubescens*)

Range: U.S.: Both are found over almost all of the United States, except for western Texas and various localities in southern New Mexico and Arizona. Kansas: Entire state.

Description: Size: the Hairy is a bit over 9 inches in length and the Downy is less than 7 inches. Color and pattern: Except for size, these woodpeckers appear alike. Both are patterned in black and white; the males with a small patch of red on the rear of the crown. They have barred wings and a white back.

Recognition: These can be told from other Kansas woodpeckers by the pattern of black and white, with the back being solid white: not barred. They may be distinguished from each other by the length and thickness of the bill. The Hairy has a proportionately longer bill, its length about the same as the distance from the base of the bill to the rear of the head; the Downy's bill is much shorter and conical in shape. In addition, the white outer tail feathers of the Hairy are unspotted, whereas those of the Downy have several black spots. Voice: Hairy, rattle call or sharp peek! Downy, rapid whinny of notes, descending in pitch, or a flat pick!

Habitat: Woodlands, riparian woods, parks, and open country with scattered trees. The Downy is often urban.

Habits: Both are essentially tree trunk feeders, seeking insects and larvae from the bark crevices and tunnels.
LADDER-BACKED WOODPECKER (*Dryobates scalaris*)

**Range:**
U.S.: southwest deserts from east-central Texas westward into eastern California.
Kansas: extreme southwest corner of the state.

**Description:**
Size: length 7½ inches.
Color and pattern: Black and white, with barred back. Male has a conspicuous red cap. There is a black triangular stripe on the cheek. Spots occur on the upper sides.

**Recognition:**
The unique striped cheek pattern separates it from other "ladder-back" woodpeckers in Kansas. Of course, the limited range in the state is important, too. Voice: call is a rattling series of descending notes or a sharp pick!

**Habitat:**
Desert or near-desert conditions. Open area. Once known as the Cactus Woodpecker. Often in towns and rural areas.

**Habits:**
Eats cactus fruits and beetle larvae. May nest in trees when present; otherwise in telephone poles and wooden gate posts.
PILEATED WOODPECKER (Dryocopus pileatus)

Range: U.S.: Over much of the United States where suitable forest habitat occurs.
Kansas: Eastern one-fourth of the state; more common in the extreme east and southeast.

Description: Size: large, up to 18 inches in length; wingspread 30 inches.
Color and pattern: Black or dark brown with conspicuous red crest and red stripe along cheek. White patches show in flight. Female lacks the red of the male.

Recognition: Easy. This bird is crow size, with long neck and black and white flashing pattern in flight. The red crest (Woody Woodpecker), striped head and neck, and large size are recognition characteristics when the bird is on a tree. Voice: loud, regular kik-kik-kik-kik-kik-kik, etc.

Habitat: Rather heavy, mature woods, often near water is preferred. Riparian woodlands with dead trees extend the range deeper into Kansas from the east. Large dead trees or living trees with dead stubs are necessary for nesting cavities and foraging.

Habits: Very loud call. Pileateds work over stumps and dead trees with tremendous enthusiasm, searching for insects and larvae. The size of the holes and chips at nesting and feeding sites is remarkable. These birds are quite tolerant of humans, but are cautious.
OBSERVATIONS. Woodpeckers are fun to watch, and a study of their behavior can be educational as well as interesting. Start keeping a field notebook and seek out spots where woodpeckers should occur. Note how the birds fly, what type and size trees they land on when seeking food or building nests, what part of the tree do they first land on and how do they go about their movements on the tree trunk; if they are nesting, how high is the nest hole? is it new or an old one? which sex (or both) feeds the young birds? how often do they feed the young? Make comparisons among the different kinds on various aspects of their behavior. When and how do they call? Under what circumstances? You will soon find that you are really getting to know the woodpeckers better than you first learned about them from books. But do not neglect the books, for they are important. See what others have said about the species that you have observed and compare their observations with yours.

ATTRACTING WOODPECKERS. Woodpeckers are not as easy to attract to your yard as many other kinds of birds. They are usually attracted there first if your yard has trees; and large, mature trees are better than younger ones. Once the woodpecker comes to examine the trees, it may continue to return if it discovers a suet feeder attached to the trunk of one of the trees. This suet feeder may be made by folding a piece of hail screen over the suet (beef fat which may be obtained from your butcher) and hanging it on a couple of nails driven into the trunk of the tree. Incidentally, certain woodpeckers, such as the Flicker, Red-bellied Woodpecker, and Downy, often feed on seeds provided at a regular bird feeder, and sometimes they become addicted, spending a great deal of time there. Downy Woodpeckers have been known to nest and to make winter roosts in a hollow-log construction supplied with a bit of sawdust. It is possible to attract woodpeckers to nest in boxes provided for this purpose. Plans for these boxes may be obtained from your local Audubon chapter, from the Kansas Fish and Game Commission, or by writing to the National Audubon Society.

CONSERVATION. Why should we want to consider conservation when we are discussing woodpeckers? Woodpeckers are birds, and birds are indicators of the quality of our environment. Can you imagine not having birds around? No Sparrows or Starlings in the backyard; no flocks of Blackbirds in the country; no Gulls or Terns at the seashore; no Ducks or Geese on lakes or in migratory flights overhead; no Mockingbirds or Cardinals singing for our picnics; no Hawks circling above; no Quail or Pheasants in cultivated fields; and not any of the many species that we are used to seeing constantly. The world would be a desolate place indeed! Of course, it would not be the birds alone that would be gone, for, if we do not maintain environmental quality, we will not only have fewer and fewer birds, but there will be fewer and fewer of everything else.

More people are interested in birds than in any other kind of animal — they like birds. And so it is that we try to
arouse public interest in the environment through its interest in birds. There are profound understandings of environmental relationships that will not be dealt with here, but it is extremely important to maintain the habitats and species of birds that we still have left today; for when we do, we are helping to maintain survival of many more species than birds — including mankind. So, quality of the air, quality of the waters, maintenance of forests and wetlands, wise use of pesticides and other chemicals, and participation by everyone in environmental issues are basic necessities; not just propaganda of politicians or environmental “freaks.”

In the last 300 years there have been over 130 kinds of birds that have become extinct or are on the verge. We hear that there are only five California Condors left in the wild and we strive to save the Whooping Crane, which may or may not make it. In Kansas, we no longer have the Passenger Pigeon and the Carolina Paroquet — it’s too bad, but we managed to do away with them completely. Among the Woodpeckers, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, largest of our native forms in the United States, probably no longer exists. So we are faced today with the situation that faced the Pioneers, who thought that birds, such as the Passenger Pigeon, were in endless abundance. We still have lots of birds, including quite a few woodpeckers, but they are not in unlimited numbers. It is time, today, to start getting into our minds the idea that we had better know about — and take care of — our natural resources while we can. Thus, learn all you can about the woodpeckers and other birds, their habits and habitats. In so doing, you will gain the kind of insight that will be necessary in making decisions that determine their future — and ours.

We must be alert to the danger of losing our most important, basic necessities by listening to those who make an attractive case for their own cause and not looking far enough ahead to the future results. As Fred Smith stated in 1956, in an address to the Recreation, Conservation, and Park Council in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania:

“Those who would despoil the nation, usurp its resources, and endanger its future for immediate gain more often than not depend upon politics to get their way. Conservationists traditionally have hoped that widespread public education would deter such efforts at exploitation; but important as it is; leisurely education is becoming progressively less dependable in the tight spots because — well, because it is amazing how a talented word-smith can confuse the most genuinely interested layman by somehow making an out-and-out theft of resources ring out as a thoughtful, considered measure to advance the cause of Conservation.”

One bright light in Kansas wildlife conservation has been the establishment of a nongame wildlife unit in the Kansas Fish and Game Commission organization. This was mandated by the Kansas Legislature in 1975, but it was not funded until 1977. Passage of a bill in 1980 allowed the people of Kansas to donate to the nongame program by making a contribution on their Kansas income tax.
forms. This has become known as the "Chickadee Checkoff" because of the Chickadee that has been used to advertise it. This program has such importance that everyone should donate to it. Unfortunately, most Kansas do not understand what the term "nongame" means. A poll taken in Wichita showed that people thought that dogs, cats, and other domestic pets and stock belonged to this group. Actually, nongame covers all wild animals and plants, other than those that are regularly hunted or fished for. So, woodpeckers are "nongame," as are your backyard birds and most of the others that you see, as well as most of the other animals of the woods and fields. It is in the best interest of all Kansans to know of, appreciate, and contribute to this nongame program. You can spread the news — please do.

Information about the Nongame Wildlife Program will be cheerfully supplied if you request it from the Kansas Fish and Game Commission, Pratt, Kansas 67124.

REFERENCES

A "Birds of Kansas" publication is in preparation by area ornithologists, but the date of publication is not yet known.

Below are listed several (not all by a long shot!) publications that will prove most helpful in providing color illustrations and other pertinent information about North American birds.

National Audubon Society has recently published a set of identification guides. Each of the books contains a certain group of birds, so that it is necessary to own the entire set if you want to cover all of the North American birds.


This is the most recent field guide. It has wonderful illustrations that make identification easy. The facing page to each illustration has distribution maps and some natural history information. Although not a "pocket" book, it can easily be carried into the field.


Roger Tory Peterson is the person responsible for the popularity and widespread use of field guides, having been the first to produce a practical book that could be carried into the field, as well as having an innovative method of showing "field marks" for identification.


Well illustrated in color, this book covers all of the birds, giving song characteristics as well as range maps. The size makes it convenient to carry in your pocket into the field. Probably as handy as any field guide and cheaper, too.
DO SOMETHING WILD!

Don't Forget - check off a contribution for Nongame Wildlife on your State Income Tax Form.

Kansas nongame and endangered wildlife work has been limited by a shortage of funds. However, now all Kansas taxpayers have the opportunity to provide financial support for an expanded program.

During the 1980 Legislative session the Nongame Wildlife Improvement Program was passed. This provides the Kansas taxpayers the opportunity to check a box on their state tax form to indicate a contribution for the state's Nongame Wildlife Conservation Fund.

The money generated from this source will be specifically earmarked to fund conservation projects by the Fish and Game Commission for those species of wildlife which are not game species or furbearers. Endangered and threatened species are examples of nongame wildlife, as are some 22,600 species ranging from hummingbirds to chickadees and to herons and swans as well as minnows, lizards, turtles, freshwater clams, and insects.

Your contributions will determine how much nongame work in Kansas can be expanded, please be generous.

You, too, can be helpful by learning about endangered and threatened species; what efforts are being made to protect their habitat and determine their needs. Then share your knowledge with others, asking them to help solve the problems.

Join conservation organizations in the fight to protect nongame and endangered wildlife and to provide a healthy environment for all living things, including man.