

Northern Flickers

Of the 11 species of woodpeckers (including sapsuckers) that live in Washington, the **Northern flicker** (*Colaptes auratus*, Fig. 1) is probably the most commonly seen and heard. Previously known as the red-shafted flicker, the Northern flicker has a conspicuous white rump patch and salmon-colored wing undersides that are distinctly visible during its slow, bouncy flight. Flickers can also be identified by their loud call that sounds like *wake-up, wake-up, wake-up*; also a piercing, sharply descending *peeahr*.

Any annoyance these woodpeckers may cause for homeowners is greatly outweighed by the large number of insect pests they eat, and the number of homes they create for other wildlife.

Facts about Northern Flickers

Food and Feeding Habits

- Northern flickers commonly feed on the ground, searching for ants and beetle larvae
- While flickers eat tree-dwelling and wood-boring insects, they also will eat berries, fruits, nuts, and seeds.
- When searching for insects, flickers tap on wooden surfaces and look and listen for insect movements. If they see or hear an insect, they will continue chiseling until the insects are caught. Hollow sounds also may indicate that insects are present, thus encouraging flickers to continue chiseling away.
- Flickers are attracted to suet feeders, especially in winter.

Nest Sites and Shelter

- Northern flickers excavate nest sites in dead or dying trees, aging utility poles, fence posts, and house siding. They will also use specially designed nest boxes.

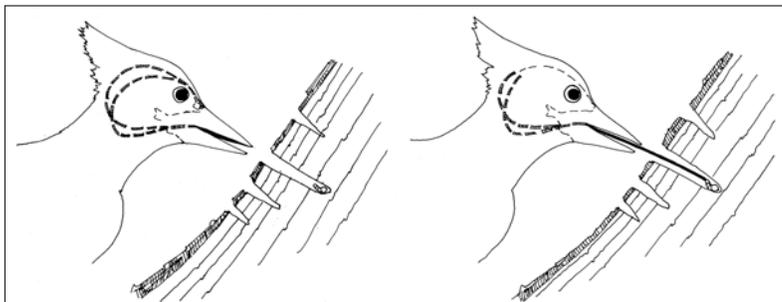


Figure 2. A woodpecker's tongue retracted (left) and extended (right). The exceptionally long tongue wraps around the skull and is anchored at the base of the bill. The tip of the tongue is barbed to help extract insects from holes, and the tongue is coated with sticky saliva. A pileated woodpecker is shown here.

(Drawing by Jenifer Rees.)



Figure 1. The Northern flicker is well adapted for life on tree surfaces.

Special adaptations include:

- (1) a strong, chisel like bill to hack into bark and wood;
- (2) a thick skull that can withstand the pounding;
- (3) long, strong toes with curved nails that can grab bark;
- (4) stiff tail feathers that prop the birds up while they are climbing or pounding; and
- (5) a very long, extendable tongue with a barbed tip.

(Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.)

- The birds use their stout beaks to chisel down 6-18 inches, making a wide bottom for the egg chamber (Fig. 3).
- Nest holes may be started but never completed, possibly due to poor location or quality of the wood. Occasionally flickers will re-use a nest hole after doing some minor work to it.
- Both male and female flickers excavate the nest, the male doing substantially more than the female. Complete excavation may take only a few days in soft wood, but averages 14 days.
- Eggs are laid on wood chips created during excavation of the nest.

Reproduction

- The breeding season for Northern flickers is from March to June, with young leaving the nest as late as mid-July.
- Both male and female flickers incubate the 5 to 8 eggs for about 11 days, then brood the newly hatched young for about 4 days.
- Both sexes feed the young, which leave the nest after 24 to 27 days.
- The parents continue to feed the young once they fledge, and soon the young begin to follow the adults to foraging sites and gather their own food.
- Individual flickers return to the same area to breed year after year.

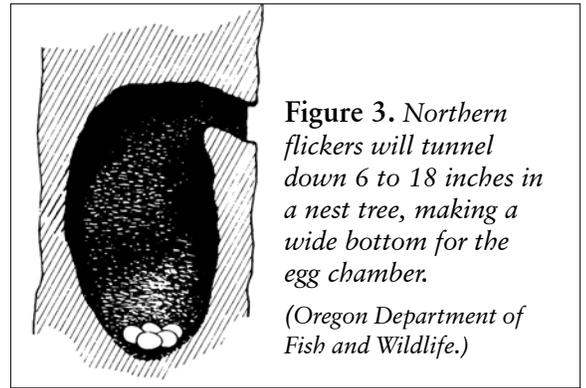


Figure 3. Northern flickers will tunnel down 6 to 18 inches in a nest tree, making a wide bottom for the egg chamber.

(Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.)

Viewing Northern Flickers

Where and When to see: Flickers are usually found in areas dominated by trees; they also occur in treeless areas where utility poles, wood-sided homes, and other structures substitute for trees. They are often seen hopping on lawns where they catch ants and other insects with their sticky tongues. Winter is a good time to watch flickers; with the leaves off many trees, the birds are more easily seen.

What to look for: Flickers can be recognized by their *undulating flight*—wings flapping as the bird flies up and wings folded on the way down. Signs of *roosting, nesting, and feeding sites* are likely to be seen in wooded areas where there are old, large trees that have some dead or rotting wood on them. Look for fresh wood chips on the ground below an excavation site. A popular feeding tree is obvious because of the number of holes in it. Flickers use various visual displays, including *head-weaving and body-bobbing*, during courtship and as signs of aggression toward intruders (Fig. 4).

The most active displaying occurs early in the breeding season, before nest-building, when the birds are pairing and there is competition for mates.

If you offer suet at your feeder, flickers may become regular visitors.

Preventing Conflicts

Flickers that have been crowded out of their wooded territories will readily use alternative structures for **drumming, seeking food, or excavating a cavity**. So the flicker that awakens you in the spring, drumming loudly on a gutter or metal flashing, is making good use of the habitat you are providing. For this reason, don't remove dead or decaying trees in the hope of driving flickers away. That makes it more likely they may investigate your house for food or a nest site.

The following are descriptions of flicker activities and suggestions for ways to remedy problems. Success will depend on timing, the availability of food and shelter, and the woodpecker's previous exposure to the tactics suggested below. The homeowner will have to weigh the trouble and expense of control against the scope of the damage caused by the bird or birds.

1) Drumming: A flicker drums to communicate with a mate or to proclaim its territory and attract a mate. This typically happens during the breeding season (mid March to June), but may continue into July. For reasons that are not fully understood, drumming may also occur for a short time in the fall.

Drumming is the most common reason for flickers to use buildings, and while it may be annoying, the bird's activity usually does not penetrate completely through wood siding.

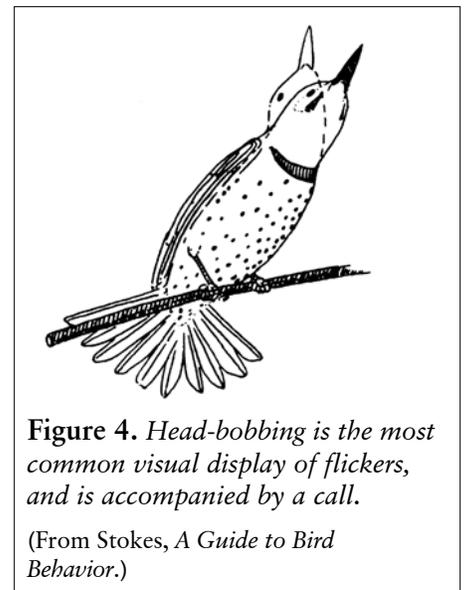


Figure 4. Head-bobbing is the most common visual display of flickers, and is accompanied by a call.

(From Stokes, *A Guide to Bird Behavior*.)

Attracting Flickers to Your Property

When managing space for flickers around your property, the most important thing to do is to protect undisturbed wooded areas, particularly those that contain dead or dying trees. While larger trees may be more suitable housing, small trees rot faster and quickly attract insects that flickers eat.

Provided they don't pose a hazard of falling on people, pets, or houses, leave any such trees for "woodpecker watching" whenever you can.

Other things you can do include:

- Install a suet feeder in winter (Fig. 5). Suet can be obtained neatly packaged from stores that cater to the bird-feeding public, and at farm supply centers and hardware stores.
- Install a nest box that is specially designed for flickers (see WDFW's "Nest Boxes for Birds" pamphlet for information).
- Avoid using pesticides, especially insecticides.
- Leave ant colonies for flickers to find and harvest. (An Oregon biologist found over 2,000 ants in the stomachs of flickers.)
- Leave some fruit on orchard trees for flickers to eat in late summer, fall, and winter.

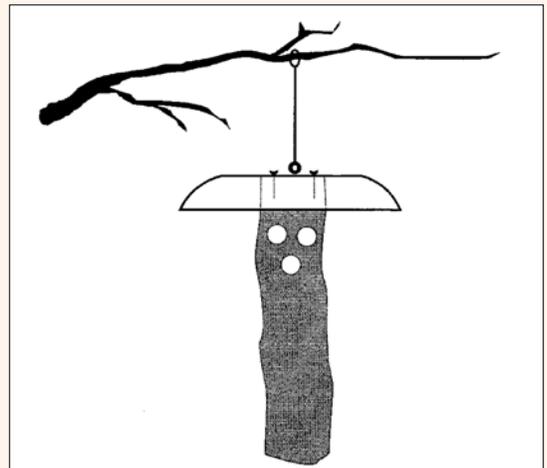


Figure 5. Suet or peanut butter can be placed in feeder holes that are one inch in diameter and one inch deep. Attach a tree limb to a lightweight skillet using outdoor wood screws and a threaded bolt.

(From Link, *Landscaping for Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest*. Feeder design by Ken Short.)

Flickers will return year after year to the same house because it works for them; they attract a mate this way. Thus, a flicker that has been using the same location for several years will be hard to move.

To discourage drumming, try a combination of the following strategies:

Scare the flicker by hanging strips of Mylar scare tape or floating Mylar party balloons in front of the area of activity (Fig. 6). When using scare tape, strengthen each strip by attaching a piece of duct tape or nylon packing tape to each end. Tack or nail one end to the outer end of the roof soffit, just under the gutter, and attach the other end to the side of the house. Before attaching the bottom, twist the tape 6 to 7 times and keep the tape loose enough to provide some slack. The slack and twisting are necessary to produce the shimmering effect. Apply these tape strands at parallel intervals of 2 to 3 feet.

You can also try hanging aluminum pie pans horizontally along a rope or section of twine (Fig. 6). Run one end of the rope to a convenient window and fasten it to an object inside the house. Whenever you hear drumming, jerk on the string to make the pans move.

Some people have had success with stapling large rubber spiders in the vicinity of the drumming birds. Large, black rubber spiders are available from most party stores. The Birds Away Attack Spider® is vibration/sound activated and will respond to the drumming of woodpeckers, by dropping down on a "web" cord. Batteries then retract the spider back up the cord, where it waits for the next unsuspecting woodpecker to arrive.

Scaring the flicker by shouting and banging pans outside a nearby window may provide temporary

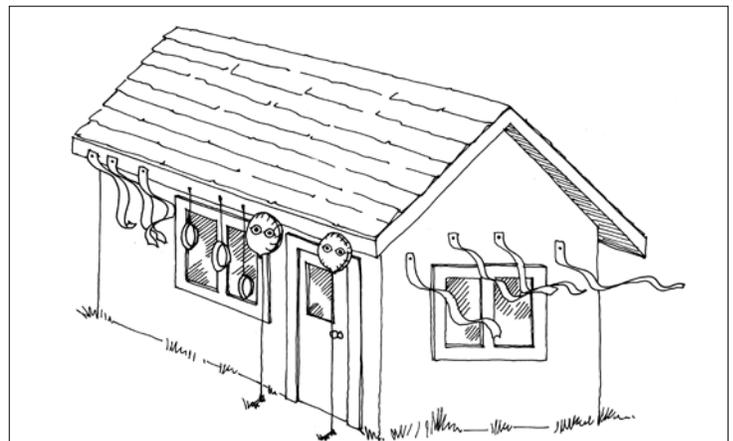


Figure 6. Scare the flicker away from a drumming site by hanging strips of Mylar scare tape or aluminum pie pans or floating Mylar party balloons in front of the area of activity. (Drawing by Jenifer Rees.)

relief. A squirt of water with a garden hose can have a similar effect. Again, flickers living in urban areas likely will have grown accustomed to such noises and activity, and the results will be short lived. (*Note:* Scaring flickers away from a nest containing eggs or young is illegal.)

Create a barrier by covering or wrapping the gutter, down-spout, or other drumming site with a sheet, tarp, burlap, or other material. A large area of siding can be protected by hanging a sheet, tarp, or bird netting from the roof gutter or eave (Fig. 7). Be sure to cover any ledges or cracks the bird uses as a foothold while drumming. If you cannot fasten the material to the gutter or eave, attach it to a board that has been temporarily fastened along the top of the wall.

If a single board on the house serves as a toehold, heavy monofilament fishing line or stainless steel wire can be tightly stretched approximately 2 inches above the landing site to prevent the flicker from perching.

Repel flickers by applying a commercially available, nontoxic woodpecker-protective coating spray where activity is taking place. The spray exudes an aromatic and taste deterrent when pecked.

A note on where to get materials: Mylar scare tape, Mylar scare balloons, bird netting, and woodpecker repellents are available from farm supply centers, nurseries, and on the Web (search for “bird control supplies.”) Some pest-control companies sell heavier netting with a larger mesh than common bird netting used to protect fruit. Such netting is not as likely to create problems for small songbirds, which sometimes get caught in the smaller mesh.

2) Seeking Food: Flickers inspect tree trunks and branches for wood-boring beetles and other insects throughout the year. If a flicker pecking is not restricted to one location on your house, and if it occurs any time of year, the bird is probably gathering insects, or their eggs or larva. Physical evidence of this behavior includes soft pecking in straight lines that result in dime-sized holes.

Once they have established a feeding pattern on a house, flickers can be very persistent, and the holes they create may serve as visual attractants to other flickers. So, it is important to get them to stop as soon as possible.

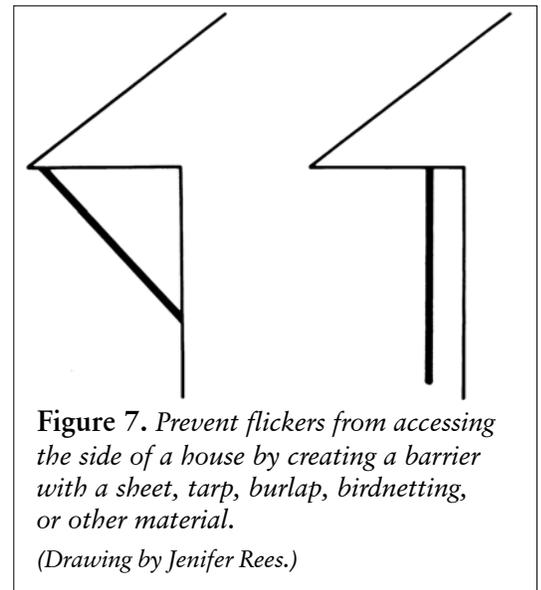
Note that the flickers may be doing you a favor by drawing attention to an insect infestation. As a temporary measure, you can create a barrier between the bird and food source by using one of the techniques described earlier.

For the long term, you’ll need to control the insects if you have an infestation, and then make any necessary repairs or modifications with wood filler, caulk, or other materials. You may want to consult a licensed pest-control operator on how to remove the insects and eliminate future infestations.

3) Excavating a Nest or Roost Site: If you find a round opening about the same width as the flicker in the siding or other boards, the woodpecker is probably excavating a cavity to nest or roost in. Often the birds pull out insulation from between the walls and there may be evidence of this below the new hole.

In the spring or early summer, assume there is an active nest with eggs or chicks inside. Scaring flickers away from an active nest is illegal. So, after the young birds have left the nest (generally by mid-June), immediately seal the opening to prevent starlings, house sparrows, squirrels, or other animals from using the cavity.

If a flicker has nested or attempted to nest in a wall, you might consider providing a nest box specially designed for a flicker as an alternative nest site. Flickers commonly use nest boxes. A nesting flicker may defend its territory and keep other flickers away.



Public Health Concerns

Northern flickers are not considered to be a significant source of any infectious disease transmittable to humans or domestic animals.

Legal Status

The Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act protects Northern flickers. A state permit and federal permit can be obtained to use lethal means to control flickers when extreme damage is occurring on private property. Such permits are only granted after all other nonlethal control techniques have proven unsuccessful. Contact your local Fish and Wildlife office for permit information.

Resources

Books

- Ehrlich, Paul R., et al. *The Birder's Handbook: A Field Guide to the Natural History of North American Birds*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988.
- Morse, Robert W., et al. *Birds of the Puget Sound Region*, R.W. Morse Company, 2003.
- Peterson, Roger Tory. *A Field Guide to Western Birds*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990.
- Stokes, Donald W., and Lillian Stokes. *A Guide to Bird Behavior*. Volumes 1-3, Boston, MA: Little, Brown, Stokes Nature Guides, 1979, 1983, and 1989.
- Udvardy, Miklos D. F. *Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds—Western Region*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977.

Internet Resources

Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage:

wildlifedamage.unl.edu/handbook/handbook/

Seattle Audubon's Birds of Washington State:

www.birdweb.org/birdweb/

Managing Small Woodlands for Cavity Nesting Birds:

www.woodlandfishandwildlife.org

Wildlife Control Supplies:

www.wildlifecontrolsupplies.com/

Adapted from "Living with Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest" (see <http://wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/living.htm>)

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Illustrations: As credited

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