



Wary^{but} Welcome Woodpecker

Text and photo by Kevin T. Karlson

In late summer and fall, a family group of Northern Flickers often visits my Cape May, N.J., back yard. The birds probe the grass for grubs and ants, hopping from point to point between feeding forays.

Although somewhat tolerant of human activity, having adapted to urban and suburban habitats for nesting and wintering, our guests clearly prefer that my wife and I stay out of sight. At our slightest appearance, they fly into a tree line for cover.

When we move out of sight, the flickers return to the lawn to continue feeding. I enjoy watching their behavior and interactions from my bedroom window and have snapped quite a few photos.

These wonderful woodpeckers choose to nest mostly in dead tree trunks or snags, so creating appropriate flicker nest habitat can be challenging. My wife and I, however, always leave dead trees standing for a few years to serve as perches for songbirds and feeding areas for woodpeckers.

You can imagine our delight when a pair of Northern Flickers decided to make their home 30 feet from the front door of our home. Their first nest was difficult to establish and maintain, as European Starlings kept stealing the nest hole.

This introduced European species is a primary reason for the dramatic decline in Northern Flicker — more than a 60 percent decline over the last 20 years, according to Cornell Lab of Ornithology. The starlings' aggressive nature accounts for countless failed Northern Flicker nest attempts each year.

I chased starlings away from the flickers' nest hole many times, and eventually the woodpeckers nested. On one July

morning, though, I heard both adults calling frantically outside their nest, and I knew something was wrong.

Venturing outside, I saw a large black rat snake coming out of their nest hole, 35 feet off the ground. It had eaten the young and was slithering to the ground.

When the flickers returned the following year and excavated a new hole, I wrapped the base of the tree with a two-foot-wide piece of metal flashing to prevent the snake from climbing. The flickers nested again and raised three young to fledgling stage.

From my roof, I photographed both adults feeding the young and actually captured an image of one fledgling taking his first flight from the nest hole. Once the young leave the hole, they never return.

The adults feed the young in surrounding trees and teach them to find food. It is always fun to watch young flickers trying to dig grubs from the grass for the first time, usually without much success.

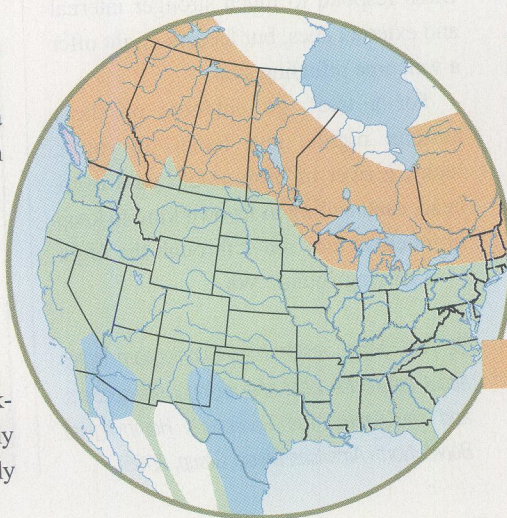
Young flickers grow into one of the largest and most conspicuous members of

the woodpecker family, measuring 11 to 12 inches long with a 17- to 20-inch wingspan. Widespread in geographic range, the species occurs just about everywhere in North America with trees and open woodlands.

Northern Flicker looks grayish-brown, barred above and spotted below, with a black crescent on its chest. The yellow-shafted subspecies appears in eastern and northern states, with its central shaft and undersides of wing and tail feathers bright yellow. It shows a gray crown and a tan face and throat. Both male and female display a red crescent on their napes, while the male has a black moustache stripe.

The red-shafted subspecies appears in western states, with red or salmon color replacing the yellow of its eastern cousin. It has a brown crown and a gray face and throat. Males have red moustache marks, while females have brown moustache marks against a gray face. Both subspecies give a loud, distinctive call note, "peah," and a loud series of "wik-wik-wik-wik" notes and a soft "wik-a-wik-a-wik-a."

The two subspecies — yellow-shafted and red-shafted — were considered separate species when I started birding 30 years ago. They were lumped into one species in 1983 based on interbreeding in a broad but narrow hybrid zone ranging from southern Alaska to the Texas panhandle. A third subspecies, Gilded Flicker, resides in the desert southwest and recently was



Breeding range

Year-round range

Winter range

split back into its own species.

Although its recent dramatic decline in population has lessened the effect somewhat, Northern Flicker still puts on a spectacular migratory show along the Atlantic seaboard in fall. It is one of the few North American woodpeckers that migrates on a predictable basis.

Although most of their migration is nocturnal, strong northwest winds push flickers and other nocturnal songbird migrants well out to sea, and they spend the first few hours of daylight struggling to get back to the safety of land. I've seen thousands of Northern Flickers flying along the coastal dunes in Cape May, N.J., and Jones Beach, N.Y., in just a few hours after dawn. The spectacle is unforgettable.

While it's the more northerly nesting Northern Flickers that migrate (birds that breed above 37 degrees latitude), more southerly birds remain near their breeding areas or move locally to take advantage of more productive food sources. Red-shafted flickers also migrate, but their movements are so spread out over a wide area that their migration goes mostly unnoticed.

A unique behavioral aspect is the birds' tendency to feed on the ground and on downed trees. Although Northern Flicker has the same ability as other woodpeckers to climb tree trunks vertically using

Northern Flickers nest mostly in dead tree trunks or snags, so luring them to your yard might be challenging. The chicks leave the nest about three weeks after hatching.



Habitat: open woodlands, woodland edges, suburban and urban parks and back yards
Mating: Monogamous pairs form with spring courtship displays, and the pair remains together for at least one season.

Nest: Male primarily constructs nest cavity in soft wood of dead or decaying tree or snag. Female assists to a lesser extent in nest excavation.

Clutch: Depending upon food availability, female lays on average six white eggs (possible three to 12 eggs).

Incubation period: Male and female incubates eggs typically for 11 days from date of laying.

Nestling period: Both parents bring food to young.

Fledgling period: Hatchlings leave the nest 24 to 27 days after hatching, looking like small adults but duller in color and markings.

Diet: Mostly insects, especially ants, from spring to fall; includes fruits and berries in winter.

stiff tail feathers as support, these birds prefer to walk or hop horizontally on the ground.

Some of Northern Flicker's favorite food sources are ants and grubs, which requires them to become terrestrial in nature. If not for that aspect, I would've missed out on seeing young flickers dig grubs from the grass in my yard. **WB**

WildBird Advisory Board member Kevin T. Karlson operates Jaeger Tours (609-465-2138, www.jaegertours.net) out of Cape May Court House, N.J.