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Birds of the Rocky Mountains -- Paul A. Johnsgard

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***Birds of the Rocky Mountains*—Species Accounts, pages
229–241: Kingfishers & Woodpeckers**

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Belted Kingfisher (*Ceryle alcyon*)

Identification: This large and conspicuous bird is easily identified by its bluish, crested head, a bluish breastband, and white underparts. It is always found near water, and in flight usually utters a dry rattling note. Often observed hovering above water, sometimes followed by a plunge into it.

Status: A resident in southern parts of the region, but more migratory farther north. Common in all the montane parks and probably breeding in all of them.

Habitats and Ecology: Found near water rich in small fish populations, usually where road cuts, eroded banks, gravel pits, or other exposed earthen surfaces provide opportunities for nesting, and usually also where nearby trees provide convenient perching sites between flights.

Seasonality: Resident in Colorado and probably much of Wyoming; in Montana migration is evident in late March and again in September or October. In Alberta the birds may arrive as late as May, or as soon as fishing areas become ice-free. They usually can be seen that far north as late as the end of October. Egg records in Colorado are from May 10 to June 15, and in Montana nesting has been reported from April 17 to June 4. In Jasper N.P. nesting has been observed as late as June 14, but by July there are usually dependent young out of the nest in Alberta.

Comments: Like terns, kingfishers hunt their prey by sight, hovering directly above the water and then plunging down and grasping a fish in their long and pointed beaks. Such fishing abilities must be learned, and adult birds teach their fledged young to catch fish by first capturing a fish, then beating it nearly senseless, and finally dropping it back into the water so that their young can capture it for themselves.

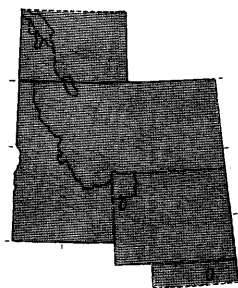
Suggested Reading: Salyer & Lagler, 1946; Kilham, 1974

LATILONG STATUS

R	R	S	s
s	R	S	S
R	R	R	r

R	R	S	R
r	R	R	R
s	R	R	R

R	R	r	R
R	M	r	M
R	R	R	R



Lewis's Woodpecker (*Melanerpes lewis*)

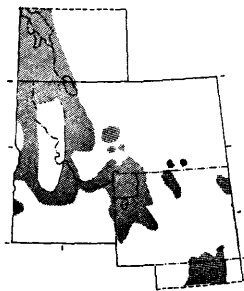
Identification: This is the only woodpecker that is mostly grayish black, with a dark red face, and reddish gray underparts. Young birds are nearly uniformly blackish, resembling a small crow.

LATILONG STATUS

S	S	S	
s	S	s	S
S	S	S	S

S	s	S	S
s	S	M	S
s	S	M	

		M	S
M	M	M	M
M	S	s	R



Status: A local summer resident in forested montane areas of the region, especially at lower altitudes; probably breeding rarely in most of the montane parks.

Habitats and Ecology: This unusual woodpecker is especially associated with pine forests that are rather open, with burned over areas having abundant dead snags or stumps. Streamside cottonwood groves are also used, as are pinyon-juniper and oak-mountain mahogany woodlands. The birds are mainly adapted to catching free-living insects rather than excavating for insects in wood, and are often observed fly-catching in a rather surprising manner for persons not used to seeing woodpeckers feeding this way.

Seasonality: A distinctly migratory species, with the birds arriving in Montana in early May and leaving in mid-September or October, rarely remaining longer. In Wyoming the migration peaks are in May and September. Some birds overwinter as far north as Colorado. Colorado nesting records are from May 15 to June 20. Farther north in the region the egg records are for June, and throughout the region nestlings have been observed from late June to the end of July.

Comments: This species is a close relative of the red-headed woodpecker of the more eastern parts of North America, and does not do much drilling for prey. Perhaps because it is poorly adapted to wood-drilling, it usually nests in dead trees, or the dead portions of live trees, where excavating is easier. Or, old nest sites of other woodpeckers may be used.

Suggested Reading: Bock, 1970; Short, 1983.

Red-headed Woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephala*)

Identification: Adults of this species are easily identified by their entirely red heads and black-and-white back and wing pattern; the white wing patch is especially evident in flight. Immatures are mostly brown and white, but have a similar white wing-patch. Like most woodpeckers, it has a raucous call.

Status: A local summer resident at lower elevations east of the mountains; rare or accidental in the montane parks except for Rocky Mountain N.P., where it is sometimes seen in summer but still not known to breed.

Habitats and Ecology: Associated with open deciduous forests, woodlots, and riparian areas, sometimes extending into the ponderosa pine zone. Aspens and riparian hardwood forests are the species' major habitats in this region. Like the Lewis' woodpecker, this species tends to nest in dead trees or the dead portions of living trees, and does less excavating for insects in wood than do most woodpeckers.

Seasonality: In Wyoming the records extend from May 15 to September 14, with the birds usually arriving about the first of June and leaving by the end of August. Colorado records are from April 22 to October 23, with one December record.

Comments: These birds are effective insect-catchers, sometimes being attracted to insects on or over highways, and thus can often be observed on telephone posts or fenceposts along roadsides. Because of their relative independence from tree-associated insects, they are often found far from forests in plains country.

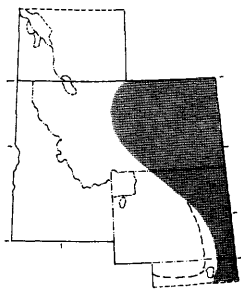
Suggested Reading: Kilham, 1977a; Reller, 1972; Bock et al., 1971.

LATILONG STATUS

	M	M	
	M		M
V			

M	M	S	S
M	M	M	S
	M	M	S

		s	S
		M	M
s	V	V	S



Acorn Woodpecker (*Melanerpes formicivorus*)

Identification: Somewhat similar to the red-headed woodpecker, but mostly black, except for a white rump, a small white wing patch at the base of the primaries, and a white throat, with red limited to the crown.

LATILONG STATUS

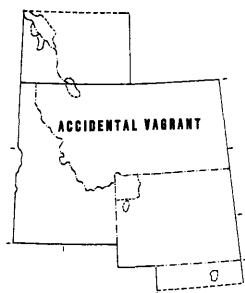
	V	

Status: An accidental vagrant in the region. Photographed in June of 1975 in the Jackson latilong of Wyoming. The nearest breeding areas are in Arizona and New Mexico.

Habitats and Ecology: Acorn woodpeckers are closely associated with pine-oak woodlands in the southwestern states.

Seasonality: No regional information. In Arizona the egg records are from May 10 to June 10, and the birds are permanent residents there.

Comments: This woodpecker is unique in that it gathers and stores acorns, which it typically caches in specially drilled holes in telephone posts or other convenient locations, and later consumes. The most common site used is a tree, often an oak, but many other kinds of trees are also used. One large oak was estimated to have some 20,000 acorns imbedded in it, while a ponderosa pine was judged to have some 50,000 acorns stored in its trunk. Acorns and similar nuts provide more than half the food of this woodpecker, especially in winter, when few insects are available.



Suggested Reading: Gutierrez & Koenig, 1978; MacRoberts & MacRoberts, 1976; Swearingen, 1977.

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*)

Identification: In this region, males have a red crown, a red nape patch, and a red throat, with these areas separated by black and white stripes. Females have red only on the crown. Both sexes have large white wing patches, and exhibit white rumps in flight. Their calls are weak by comparison with most woodpeckers. Their presence in an area is often evident by the parallel rows of holes that they drill in aspens.

Status: A breeding summer resident throughout the wooded portions of the region, common in montane areas and probably breeding in all the montane parks.

Habitats and Ecology: Coniferous forests, deciduous forests, and mixed woodlands are all used by these birds, but aspens are a favorite habitat in this region. The birds excavate holes in these trees to drink the sap, and also nest in aspens, either in dead trees or living ones that have dead and rotting interiors.

Seasonality: Wyoming records are from April 12 to December 5, with peaks in May and October. In Montana the birds usually arrive in mid-April and leave in mid-October. In Alberta they are usually seen from early May to mid-August. Colorado records are from March 30 onward, with the birds sometimes wintering. Nest-drilling in Rocky Mountain N.P. has been seen from mid-May to early June, and Colorado egg records are from June 8 to 23. In Montana and Wyoming nestlings have been noted from late June to mid-July.

Comments: After this book went to press the American Ornithologists' Union taxonomically separated the Rocky Mountain population of the yellow-bellied sapsucker as a distinct species, to be called the red-naped sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus nuchalis*). In this montane population both sexes exhibit a red nape patch, and females additionally have a partially red throat.

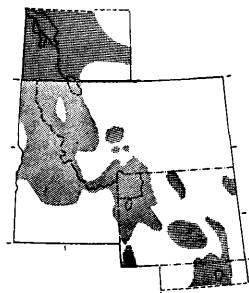
Suggested Reading: Howell, 1952; Devillers, 1970; Kilham, 1971b.

LATILONG STATUS

S	S	S	s
s	S	s	s
S	S	S	S

S	S	S	s
S	S	s	s
s	S	S	S

M	S	S	S
M	S	S	S
M	S	S	S



Williamson's Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus thyroides*)

Identification: This sapsucker resembles the preceding species, but males are much darker, with more black and no red on the crown or nape, and with an extensive black breastband. Females also have a blackish breastband, and are barred with black on the flanks and back.

LATILONG STATUS

S	S	S	
	s	s	
S	s	S	

S	S	S	
s	S	M	
	S	s	s

			M
	M	S	s
S	S	S	S

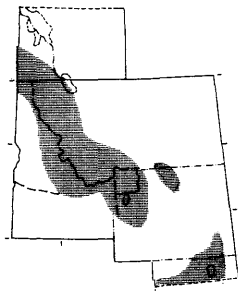
Status: A local and usually uncommon summer resident over much of the region; variably common in the U.S. montane parks, generally rare or absent in the Alberta parks.

Habitats and Ecology: Breeding in this region usually occurs in the aspen or coniferous zones, especially in burned areas of ponderosa pine forests, mainly between about 7000 and 8500 feet in Colorado, and extending somewhat higher than yellow-bellied sapsuckers in the same region. However, their ecological patterns are very similar, and they often nest in close proximity to one another.

Seasonality: Wyoming records are from April 29 to October 18, and in Montana the birds usually are present from mid-April to mid-September. Colorado records are from February 26 to September 24, and egg records in that state are from May 24 to June 16. In Wyoming and Montana eggs have been found in late May and early June, and nestlings seen as late as early July.

Comments: These birds are more prone to nest in pines, and to excavate for insects in pines, than are yellow-bellied sapsuckers. In both species it is rather easy to find nests after the young have hatched, because of the loud buzzing sounds made by the nestlings as they beg to be fed. Both species move up the mountains as summer progresses, sometimes being seen as high as 10,000 feet in late summer.

Suggested Reading: Howell, 1952; Michael, 1925; Crockett & Hadow, 1975; Crockett & Hansley, 1978.



Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*)

Identification: This species closely resembles the hairy woodpecker, but is a good deal smaller, and has a shorter and weaker beak, about half as long as the head. Both sexes are mostly black and white, with white on the back and rump, and white spotting on the wings. Males have a small red nape patch.

Status: A resident throughout the region in wooded habitats; relatively common and probably breeding in all of the montane parks.

Habitats and Ecology: A wide variety of wooded habitats are used by downy woodpeckers, including farmlots, orchards, city parks, and natural habitats ranging from riparian forests to pinyon-juniper woodlands, oak-mountain mahogany scrub, and aspen or coniferous forests.

Seasonality: A permanent resident throughout the region. Egg records in Colorado are from May 24 to June 30, and eggs have been reported as early as April 15 in Wyoming, with nestlings seen as late as July 20.

Comments: This is one of the most widespread and common of the North American woodpeckers, and has a range that essentially coincides with that of its larger relative, the hairy woodpecker. Competition between them is evidently reduced by size differences of the bill, and associated differences in foraging locations.

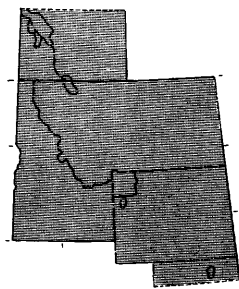
Suggested Reading: Kilham, 1962a, 1974; Lawrence, 1967; Jackson, 1970.

LATILONG STATUS

r	R	R	r
r	R	r	R
R	R	R	r

R	R	r	R
r	R	R	R
	R	R	R

R	r	r	M
M	r	M	R
s	R	R	R



Hairy Woodpecker (*Picoides villosus*)

Identification: Larger than the downy woodpecker (about 7–8 inches long), and with a heavier and longer beak that is somewhat more than half as long as the head. Both species utter a harsh rattling call, but that of the hairy tends to remain constant in pitch, rather than descending toward the end.

LATILONG STATUS

R	R	R	r
r	r	r	R
R	R	R	R

R	R	R	r
r	R	R	R
	R	R	R

R	r	r	R
M	R	R	R
M	R	R	R

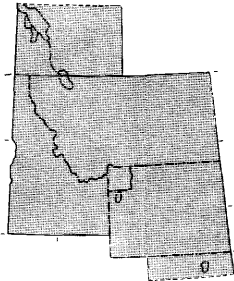
Status: A resident in wooded areas throughout the region, occurring in all the montane parks and probably breeding in all.

Habitats and Ecology: Optimum breeding habitat consists of fairly extensive areas of woodlands of conifers or hardwoods, but nesting occurs in riparian forests, in aspen groves, and in various coniferous forests nearly to timberline. Generally aspens and other hardwoods are preferred over conifers for breeding.

Seasonality: Resident throughout the region. Colorado egg records are from May 8 to June 13, and in Wyoming and Montana there are egg records from April 1 to May 22, with nestlings observed as late as July 18.

Comments: Hairy woodpeckers are somewhat less tame than downy woodpeckers, and thus somewhat less easily observed at length. They tend to forage in larger trees, and on the larger branches of small trees, than do downy woodpeckers, and rarely can be observed feeding on dead weeds or small shrubs as is sometimes typical of downy woodpeckers. Both species are attracted to suet in winter, when insect life is hard to find.

Suggested Reading: Lawrence, 1967; Kilham, 1966; Jackman, 1974; Staebler, 1949.



White-headed Woodpecker (*Picoides albolarvatus*)

Identification: This is the only North American woodpecker with a nearly entirely white head; it is otherwise mostly black except for white wing patches on the primary feathers.

Status: An accidental vagrant over most of the region; reported from at least three Montana latilongs, and there have been several unsubstantiated sightings in Wyoming. There is a sight record from Jackson Hole for October of 1924, but no other records for the montane parks. The nearest breeding areas are in northwestern Idaho and southeastern British Columbia.

Habitats and Ecology: Associated with pine and fir forests of the Pacific northwest, and extending southward into interior California. It feeds on a combination of pine seeds and insects, sometimes hanging on pine cones while extracting the seeds, and occasionally seen upside-down, in nuthatch-like positions.

Seasonality: Regional records for this species are too incomplete to provide an idea of its occurrence. In Idaho it occurs as a permanent resident only in extreme western areas, and no good seasonality information on nesting is available.

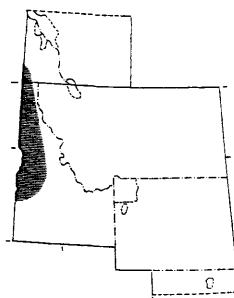
Comments: In Idaho this species seems to be associated with open ponderosa pine forests. Over half of its foods consist of pine seeds, but it also eats ants and flying insects. It pries off bark rather than drilling for insects.

Suggested Reading: Jackman, 1974; Ligon, 1973.

LATILONG STATUS

	V		
	?		
	?		

V			
	V		



Three-toed Woodpecker (*Picoides tridactylus*)

Identification: This and the following species are the only two North American woodpeckers with yellow crowns; additionally, this species has a distinctive ladder-like appearance of black and white barring on the back and flanks. Females lack yellow on the crown, but do show the barred back and flank pattern. Usually found in areas of recently burned forest.

LATILONG STATUS

R	R	R	r
	R	r	
R	M	r	R
R	r	?	
	R	M	
	R	R	M
M		M	M
M	M	M	R
		R	R

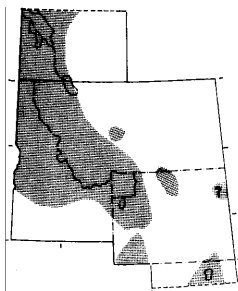
Status: A local and variably common resident in montane areas of the region; present and reported breeding in all the montane parks.

Habitats and Ecology: Like the following species, this is a fire-adapted form, typically moving into a burned forest area immediately after the fire, breeding, and dispersing four or five years later. The nest cavities that they excavate are then used by bluebirds, nuthatches, and other cavity nesters until the snags eventually topple.

Seasonality: A permanent resident throughout the area. Active nests in Colorado have been observed from June 2 to July 23, and in Montana nest-building has been observed in June, with young out of the nest by early August.

Comments: Like the following species, this woodpecker exploits newly burned forests in order to feed on bark-boring beetles that attack the recently killed trees. About three-fourths of the food of the woodpeckers comes from this source, which the birds often expose by tearing away bark rather than drilling holes. The holes they excavate for nests set into motion a nesting cycle for other species of birds that may last for several decades.

Suggested Reading: Bock & Bock, 1974; Taylor & Barmore, 1980.



Black-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides arcticus*)

Identification: Similar to the preceding species, but with an entirely blackish back; the flanks are similarly barred. Only males have the yellow crown patch; as in the other species females have a black and white head pattern.

Status: A resident in wooded areas throughout the mountains south to about Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and breeding in most or all of the montane parks from Grand Teton N.P. northward, but rare in the Alberta parks. Of uncertain occurrence in eastern Wyoming, but breeds in the adjacent Black Hills of South Dakota.

Habitats and Ecology: This species appears essentially identical to the preceding one as to its general adaptations to feeding and breeding in burned coniferous forest areas. As such, it is highly local and eruptive. Apparently the birds feed exclusively on conifers, but sometimes nest in nearby aspens.

Seasonality: A permanent resident in the region. There are few nest records, but in Colorado active nests have been seen from late May to early July, and young out of the nest have been observed in mid-July in Montana.

Comments: The blackish plumage of this and the preceding species makes them hard to see in a fire-blackened forest, and additionally both are very quiet for woodpeckers. However, accumulations of bark, flaked or torn from dead trees, accumulate at their bases, and often provide evidence of the birds in a particular locality.

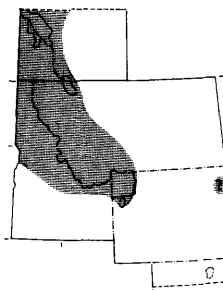
Suggested Reading: Mayfield, 1958; Bock & Bock, 1974; Taylor & Barmore, 1980.

LATILONG STATUS

R	R	R	
r	r	r	R
R	r	r	r

r	R		?
r	R		
	R		

		M	



Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auritus*)

Identification: This woodpecker is quite easily identified by the salmon-to golden-yellow color of its underwing surface when it flies; additionally, it has a white rump patch and a black breastband, with the rest of the underparts spotted heavily with black. A loud *flicker* call is commonly uttered.

LATILONG STATUS

R	R	R	s
s	R	R	R
R	R	R	r

R	R	S	R
S	R	R	R
R	R	R	R

R	R	r	R
R	R	R	R
R	R	S	R

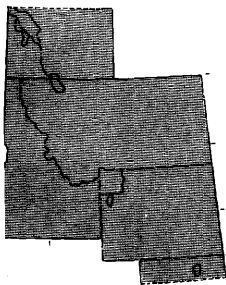
Status: A common resident or migrant throughout the region, more abundant in wooded areas, but also in open country where trees are scattered. Present in all the montane parks, and probably breeding in all of them.

Habitats and Ecology: Flickers are unusual among woodpeckers in that much of their food consists of insects such as ants that are obtained by probing in the ground rather than by excavating trees. However, they do excavate holes in trees for nesting, usually those that are already dead or have decaying interiors. Open woodlands, such as orchards, parks, and similar areas offering foraging opportunities on grassy areas nearby are preferred over dense forests.

Seasonality: Although locally resident, there are some migrations, and in Wyoming there are migration peaks in April and October. In Montana the birds usually arrive in April and leave in September, as is also true in Alberta. Colorado egg records are from May 3 to July 3, and in Wyoming eggs have been reported from May 1 to June 4. Eggs have been noted as early as May 12 in Jasper N.P.

Comments: The flickers of this region are in a zone that includes both "red-shafted" and "yellow-shafted" types, as well as all possible hybrid combinations between them. Besides the shaft color differences, males of the more westerly form (the red-shafted) have reddish "mustaches," while males of the eastern form have black feathers in this area.

Suggested Reading: Kilham, 1959; Lawrence, 1967; Short, 1965, 1983.



Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*)

Identification: The largest regional woodpecker, this crow-sized bird has a mostly black plumage with white underwing coverts and a shaggy crest that is red in both sexes but less extensive in females. Its flight is heavy and undulating; like other woodpeckers it alternates flapping and gliding regularly.

Status: A local resident in the northern parts of the region, south to southwestern Montana and adjacent Idaho. Common in the montane parks of Alberta and also Glacier N.P., but only vagrants occur in the Yellowstone area.

Habitats and Ecology: This magnificent bird is associated with mature forests of various types. Preferred habitats are usually near water and include mature trees among which there are tall trees having dead stubs, where nesting occurs. Nests are usually in trees that are 15 to 20 inches in diameter at the place of excavation, and are from 15 to 70 feet above ground.

Seasonality: A permanent resident where it occurs. Territorial drumming begins in April in Alberta, and egg dates there extend from May 10 to June 22, with half of the records for the latter half of May. In Minnesota there are egg records for early to late May, which probably corresponds to the nesting time in Montana and southern Alberta.

Comments: These large birds are quite sedentary, with pairs maintaining the same territory year after year. Territorial drumming is performed by both sexes, but mainly by the male. Incubation is by both sexes, and a female has been observed removing her eggs from a damaged nesting tree and carrying them off to some other location.

Suggested Reading: Bull & Meslow, 1977; Bull, 1975; Hoyt, 1957.

LATILONG STATUS

r	R	R	
r	R	r	s
R	R	R	s

	V	
	V	

