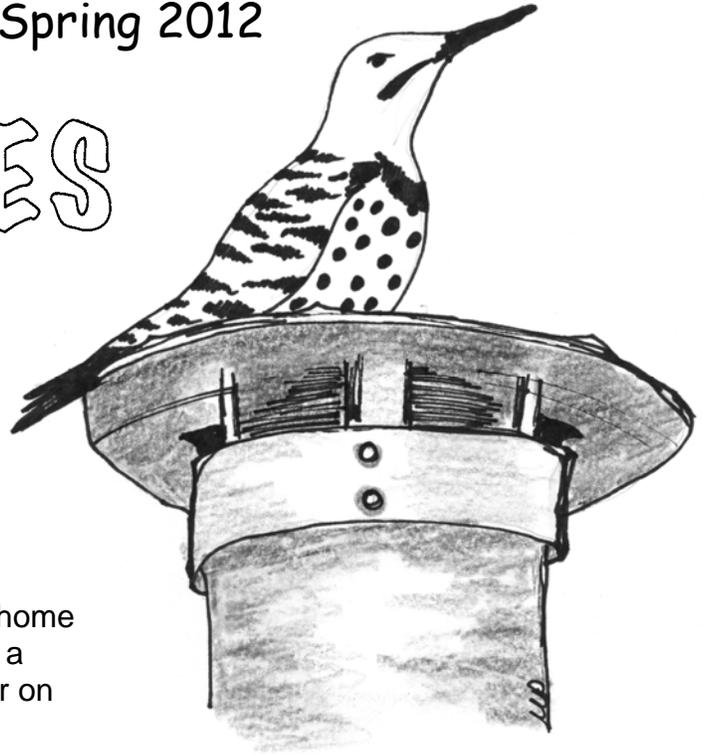


NATURE DETECTIVES

Spring 2012



Drums of Spring

Ahhh, spring...when the early morning is filled with a lullaby of bird songs....

What?!!! Suddenly you are startled wide awake as **rata tat tat tat tat** fills your house with an explosion of sound. No, the noise does not come from some home appliance about to shatter. The racket is a **northern flicker** using a metal vent cover on your roof as its drum.

Most birds sing to claim their space and attract a mate in spring. Flickers have no songs to sing. Instead, male and female flickers drum. They drum to say, "This is my territory." They drum to tell last year's mate or a new partner, "It is time to lay some eggs."

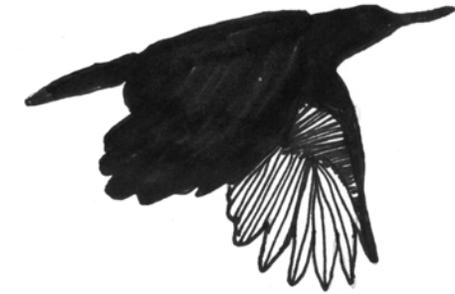
Using their bills they drum on trees or houses or fences. High spots are favorites. They want to make the most noise possible – which is why they often drum on metal parts of your roof.

Flickers are quick drummers. Their bills can hit as fast as 22 beats per second. They repeat their rhythms as often as 6 times a minute. And, if they find a good drumming spot, they will use it over and over. Since they are drumming to communicate, they usually make only dents, not holes, in their drums. They drum like this in the spring. Whew! By summer, flickers will not disturb you in the early morning. They will be busy quietly stalking ants in your grass.

Neighborhood Clowns

Although noisy flickers might be annoying at times, they do give us beauty. Flickers are pretty birds and fun to watch. A flicker looks like it is wearing a soft brown and gray sweater that has dark stripes in back and black polka dots in the front. Black feathers below the flicker's throat look like a black tee shirt showing above the sweater neckline. Feathers above the eyes are a soft orange color. The males sport bright red patches on each side of their bills. From the front, it looks like a dramatic mustache. From the side, it looks more like a clown.

Flashy Takeoff



Sudden drumming isn't the only surprise about flickers. They flap/glide to fly, flapping their wings then folding them against their sides. Their flight has a distinctive up and down pattern as they flap up and glide down, and that saves them energy.



When they take off they flash unexpected colors.

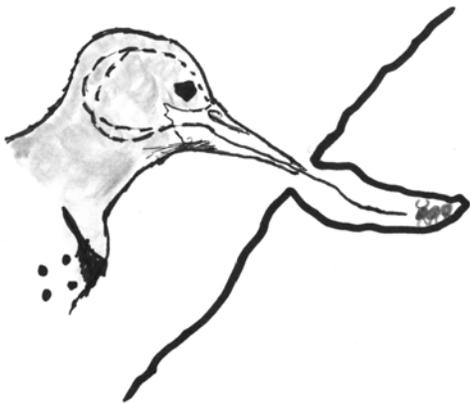
Their bright, white rump - which is their lower back - is hidden by their folded wings until they fly.



They also show reddish colors on their wings and tails in the air. That's why our flickers are called **red-shafted**. Northern flickers farther east are called yellow-shafted. Can you guess why?

Flickers have calls as attention grabbing as their flying and drumming. They have both a high-pitched "keew" and a loud, repeating wik-wik-wik-wik-wik call they make for up to 15 seconds.

Flicker Menu



What if your tongue didn't end at the back of your mouth but wrapped around the back of your skull and even into your right nostril?

If it did, you'd have a tongue like a flicker.

A flicker's tongue is so long, the bird can stick it out almost two inches to capture the insects and their larva that it eats. The end of the tongue has little barbs that snag soft bugs. A flicker also has very sticky saliva on its tongue to stick to hard-bodied insects.

Unlike other woodpeckers, flickers spend much of their time on the ground searching for food rather than mostly pecking their dinners out of tree bark. If they are pecking on your house, the wood on your house could be full of carpenter ants.

Ants may be a flicker's favorite food. Flickers are the champion ant-eating birds of North America. Scientists have found as many as 5,000 ants in one flicker's stomach. When you see them pecking into the ground with their long, slightly curved bills they are looking for ants or beetles or digging up ant or beetle larvae.

When tasty ants and grubs are less available in winter, flickers put more berries and seeds on their menus. They sometimes visit backyard birdfeeders.

Homes By

Flicker Construction Company

Flickers excavate new tree holes every year. A flicker pair pecks out more than one hole because the males and females sleep each night in separate roosting holes.

Flicker Construction signs ought to be tacked beside many critter nest holes. Chickadees, nuthatches, bluebirds, wrens, kestrels, owls, tree swallows, buffleheads, squirrels and other animals don't have bills designed to dig big holes in trees. They use old flicker holes for their own nests. Flicker holes make dry, secure shelters for raising young. It is no wonder so many animals nest in flicker holes.

Squirrels and other animals don't always wait for the flickers to vacate their homes. Starlings are non-native birds with a bad habit of kicking flickers out of their newly built nests. Some scientists think starlings are one reason there are fewer flickers now.

The evicted flicker pair will likely excavate a new nest, but the loss of a home site is a big setback in raising a family. It can take two or three weeks for the flicker pair to excavate a new nursery even when they start with a roosting hole.

Parenting Duties

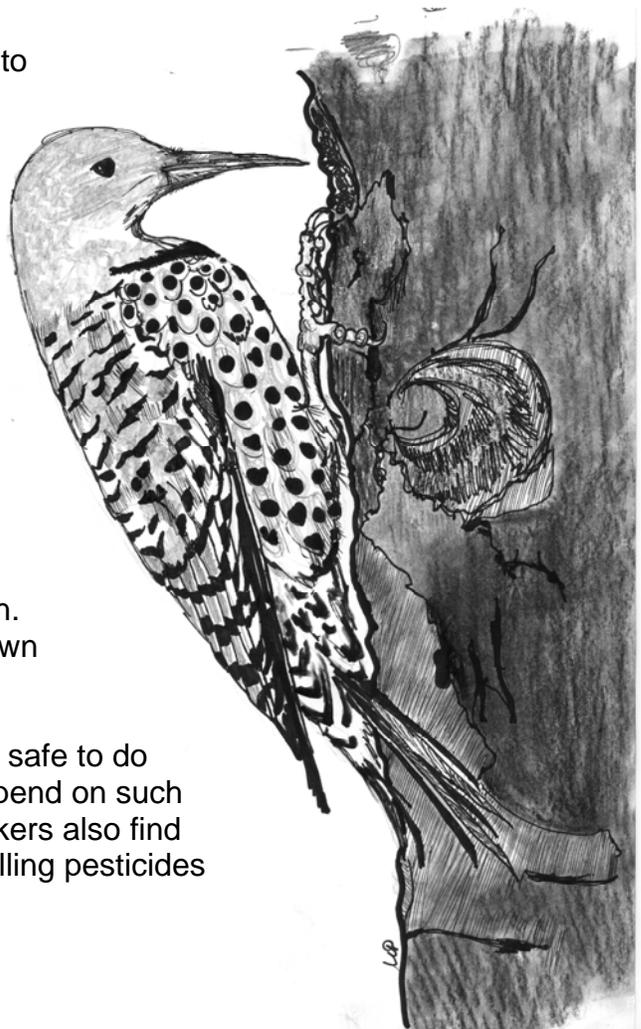
Usually the male and female birds work together to enlarge the bottom of the male flicker's roosting hole to make space for baby birds.

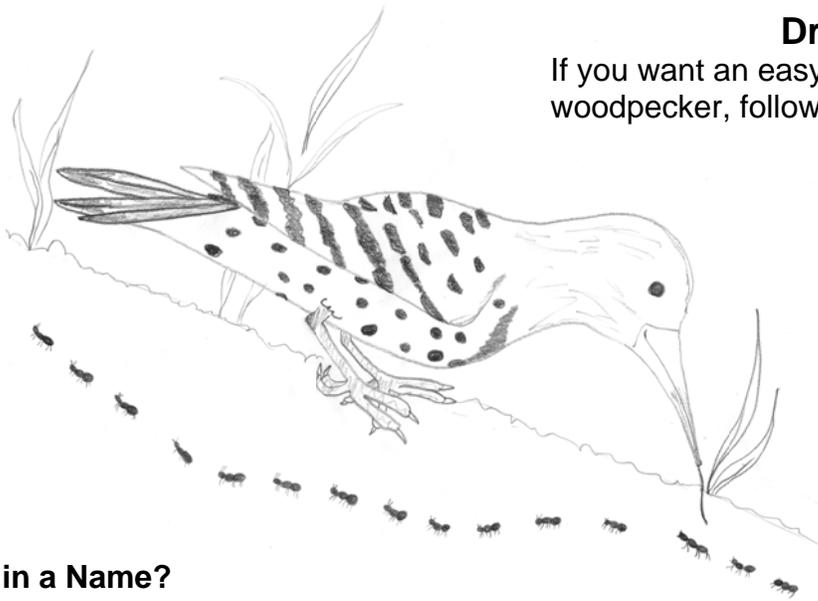
The pair take turns caring for the eggs and baby flickers, but the male flicker usually spends the night with his brood. Maybe that is because he was used to sleeping there before he had kids. The female sleeps in her own roosting hole nearby.

Habitat Loss

Another reason there may be fewer flickers in some places is that flickers prefer dead or dying trees as the easiest trees for nest hole excavation. But people favor healthy trees and tend to cut down diseased trees and dead trees.

Leaving sick and dying trees in places where it is safe to do so helps flickers and many other animals that depend on such trees as sources of food and shelter. Hungry flickers also find food more easily when people resist using bug-killing pesticides on lawns.





Draw It

If you want an easy way to draw a woodpecker, follow the steps along this page.



What's in a Name?

When flickers are communicating quietly with near-by flickers, they make a sound like “wika wika wika,” sometimes described as “flicka flicka flicka.”

The sound may have led to their common English name, flicker.

Some people call flickers “wake-ups” or “red-hammers.”

With a friend you could think up other creative names for flickers.

Fitting names might express what flickers do or what they look like.

Search for the Biggest and the Littlest

Spend some time outdoors watching for robin-sized flickers. Flickers are the biggest woodpeckers in Boulder County, and they are the most common woodpeckers in our area year-round. They don't mind being around people so they are fairly easy to observe in open forests and in parks and backyards from the plains to the mountains.

Our littlest woodpeckers are the sparrow-sized downy woodpeckers.

Like flickers, they are in parks, backyards and forests.

Downy woodpeckers are black and white with petite bills, shorter than the width of their heads. Males have a red patch on the backs of their heads.

Drum like a Flicker

After every line of this little rhyme, tap a drum or clap your hands like a flicker.

How does he know where to dig his hole,
The woodpecker there on the telephone pole?

X x x x x x x x / X x x x x x x x

Is he looking for an aspen limb to use for a drum or to dig in?

X x x x x x x x / X x x x x x x x

How does he find where the young bugs grow? I'd like to know!

X x x x x x x x / X x x x x x x x