

NATURE DETECTIVES



Winter 2017



Downy and Hairy, the Woody Look-alikes

Winter is a good time to search for downy and hairy woodpeckers. With luck you might find both species in the same Boulder County Park.

Identifying *which* bird you are viewing is a tricky challenge. Both birds sport dazzling black and white feathers. The feathers are patterned in spots, stripes and solid black or white. A patch of red feathers on the back of the head marks the males. The feather patterns on the two species closely resemble each other.

To watch for downy and hairy woodpeckers, spend some time exploring places with trees. Woodpeckers need trees like goldfish need water.

Downy woodpeckers like forests with a variety of trees. They visit trees in city parks and trees around houses. Downies sometimes check out bird feeders.

Hairy woodpeckers prefer mixed forests with larger trees. Hairies are not as common around towns.

Downies and hairies search for food in different ways even on the same tree. The smaller **downy** is a little acrobat, often hanging upside down under a tiny twig or clinging to a slender weed stem in the grass. The heavier **hairy** searches along tree trunks and large branches. Sometimes hairies forage on the ground.

Fleeting Flocks of Little Birds Forage and Fly

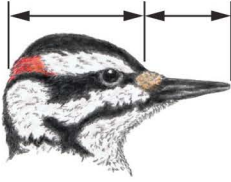
Chick-a-dee-dee! Did you hear it? Stop and watch for movement in the trees. The chickadees will be calling to each other as they hunt for food this winter. Their chick-a-dee-dee chatter often signals the arrival of a mixed group of birds briefly traveling together in open woods. It is a good opportunity to look for downy woodpeckers. Downies often join a mixed flock that might include nuthatches too. The birds take advantage of the combined eyesight of the group to watch for hawks, owls and other predators while they forage for food.



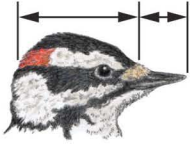
Shadows and Light, Dark and White – Hide in Plain Sight

When sunlight filters through a forest, shadows crisscross branches, trunks and leaves as sunshine lights up the trees. The woodpeckers' black and white patterning is good camouflage in a wooded habitat preferred by both downies and hairies.

Clues to Hairy and Downy Identification



Size difference, head to tail, between the almost seven-inch downy and the over nine-inch hairy is quite easy to see...if the birds would just perch on a tree side by side. Hah! That's not likely to happen. Slight differences between the feather patterns of these look-alike woodpeckers are also tricky to observe.

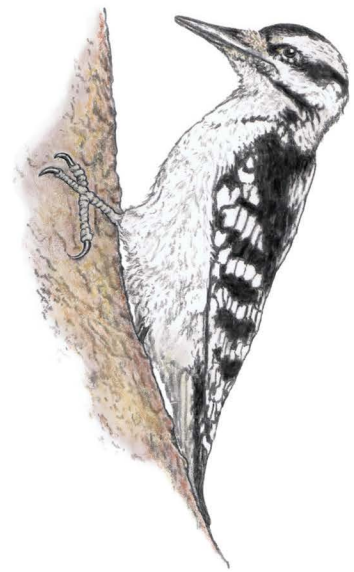


Fortunately, bird sizes and feather patterns are not the only clues. A sharp-eyed detective can notice that the downy has a short beak while the hairy's beak is quite long relative to their head sizes.

Body of a Tree Climber and Excavator

Loggers of yesteryear wore shoes with nails sticking out of the soles to grip the trunks of trees. Woodpeckers have sharp, curved claws to serve the same function. They have two clawed toes pointing forward and two pointing backward to cling tightly to bark.

They also have strong, stiff tail feathers that act like a prop or brace. The tail and clawed toes give solid support for hammering into trees. The tail and toes keep the birds from being knocked backward when their beak hits wood. The legs and tail work together to give the woodpecker a rather jerky, hopping motion as it walks up branches and trunks.



Heads for Hammering

If you run into a tree face-first, you are likely to get a nosebleed, a broken nose or even a concussion. Woodpeckers hammer into trees without injury. The secret to their safety is all in their head.

First of all, their ax-like beak is incredibly tough. Thick bones and muscles behind the beak act as shock absorbers, cushioning the hammer blows. Their brain is protected from bouncing around by fitting tight inside their skull.

Stiff feathers surround their nostrils at the back of the beak and serve as a dust mask to keep out sawdust. They close their eyes just before their beak makes contact.

Hammering is a whole body effort and is used for excavating holes for nesting and roosting. The birds use a gentler strike to reach insects and larvae hidden beneath bark.

Both hairies and downies also use tapping and drumming with their beak to attract mates, announce their location and claim territory.

Tap – Tap – Tapping for Food

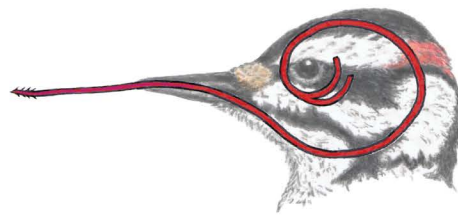
Downy woodpeckers use their smaller beak to chisel off pieces of bark to uncover insects, insect eggs or larvae hidden below. Small beaks easily probe small crevices and cracks for food bits. They investigate the underside of leaves as well. This smallest of our woodpeckers can cling to weeds to tap into stems for hidden bugs. Toward spring downies tap little holes in live trees to sip the sap that pools in the small openings.

Hairy woodpeckers hammer harder to reach insects and larvae hidden in deeper channels inside the trees. Their longer bills reach into deep cracks and crevices to find food. Woodpeckers provide a strong defense for trees against tree-killing beetles.

Both kinds of woodpeckers add to their insect diet with seeds and berries. They also snatch spiders, and they sometimes hide food for later.

Sticky Woodpecker Tongues

Muscles and bone give the back of the downy and hairy woodpecker tongue strength for pushing into nooks and crannies.



The tip of their tongue is coated with sticky saliva that adheres to bugs and eggs. The tasty tidbits are pulled from their hiding places and put directly into the woodpecker's mouth.

Both woodpeckers have a long tongue, but the hairy's tongue is especially long to reach into deeper holes. For each species, most of the tongue conveniently coils up inside their skull when it isn't in use.

The Wonder of Woodpecker Holes

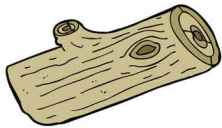
Woodpecker drumming increases considerably in spring. The sounds signal the start to the busy season of finding a mate, excavating a nest hole together and raising their young. The woodpeckers will only use the nest hole for one season's nestlings.

The next year, a chickadee, nuthatch, wren or maybe even a little mouse will move into an old woodpecker hole that they could not create themselves. Holes are better shelters in bad weather than nests built out on branches. Nest holes are valued for their security from predators such as snakes, bears and raccoons.



Life in Dead Trees

Take a walk in the woods. Are there any dead trees standing? Dead, standing trees are often called “snags.” If you find one, observe it for a while and look for wildlife. When a tree dies, the heartwood inside the tree softens as fungus grows in the wood. This makes it much easier for woodpeckers to excavate holes and find insects. Many other animals also bore into the dying wood to make a home.



You can also look for decaying wood on the ground. Compare the hardness of that wood to the strong wood of a living tree, and you'll see why woodpeckers enjoy the dead snags!

Tongue Test

Woodpeckers have a very long, thin tongue to stick into tree crevices to catch bugs. How long is your tongue? See how far you can stick your tongue out in front of your face. Imagine trying to use your tongue to get insects out of tiny crannies in tree trunks.

The long woodpecker tongue coils up inside the woodpecker's skull, kind of like a party favor. Our tongues are attached at the base of our throats and don't coil up. Our tongues are better for licking ice cream cones than catching bugs!



Watching Woodpeckers in Your Yard

Downy woodpeckers often visit backyard feeders. Even though they eat lots of insects, some of their favorite treats are also sunflower seeds, nuts, and suet. Suet is a high-fat food that provides needed nutrition for birds, especially in winter. Bird seed and suet can be purchased at local stores. You can also make your own cold weather suet with this simple recipe:

1 part crunchy peanut butter
1 part yellow cornmeal
1 part melted bacon grease

(**Note:** Melted bacon grease can cause burns on your skin when it is hot. It is wise to ask for **adult assistance** when making the suet recipe.)



Mix together and press into a mold (you can use a flat plastic food container) and let it harden. Then you can put it in a suet feeder, or just place it on a flat platform above the ground. If your suet doesn't harden, rub some onto tree bark or dab some into pinecones to hang on a branch.



Sherlock Fox says: Try keeping a record of the birds that visit your suet. How many different species enjoy the fatty treat?



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