

Northern Flicker: Hey, ladies, listen to my drum beat

BY BRUCE MCCAMMON

As we walked on the Apple Capital Loop Trail one spring, we heard what sounded like a jackhammer pounding on metal.

We'd heard variations of this before and knew that we'd soon see a Northern Flicker sitting on top of a light along the path.

We paused after we located the bird and watched it repeatedly drum on the top of the light.

It was spring and the male flicker was announcing himself to the ladies as well as letting other males know that he was staking the area out as his own.

These birds seem to have discovered that if they pound on metal, the sound carries farther and is louder. Other woodpeckers drum on trees to accomplish the same end.

The behavior is well understood and interesting to watch



Bruce McCammon is retired, color-blind and enjoys photographing the birds in north central Washington.



— unless the flicker sets up shop on your house's wood siding. Then, the behavior gets seriously annoying.

If you move them around frequently, Owl effigies may help deter the woodpecker from chiseling into your siding.

The Northern Flickers we see in north central Washington are also referred to as "red-shafted" flickers due to the color of the feathers on the undersides of the wings and tail feathers. The

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eastern United States supports "yellow-shafted" flickers.

Our flickers show a distinctive black bib with undersides that are richly patterned with spots, bars and crescents. Males have a red moustache stripe that runs from its bill down to its cheek.

These birds are frequently seen on the ground as they hop about stirring up piles of leaves and debris in search of ants, caterpillars, termites or beetle larvae. They will also eat berries and nest in tree cavities.

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a pair of flickers run a pair of Red-breasted Nuthatches out of a new cavity in the Horan Natural Area. Size and attitude do matter.

Northern Flickers are usually found in areas with lots of trees. We don't see them in shrub-steppe areas unless power poles or wood-sided houses are common.

Northern Flickers have a distinctive flight pattern. As they fly, they move up and down along the flight path with short periods when the bird glides between longer periods of rapid wing beats. You're likely to see a white patch at the top of the tail as the bird flies away.

Since Northern Flickers are here all year, you have a good chance to see or photograph them. Your chances to observe them are increased during the winter when the trees are leafless. Bundle up and go find them. Don't forget your binoculars and camera.

Good luck.