



Does a Sapsucker Suck Sap?

Photos and story by
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“Maaw!” The distinct and plaintive high-pitched cry lets us know that our visiting red-naped sapsucker has arrived.

Red-naped sapsuckers are distinguished by a red patch on the back of the head in addition to the red on the tops of the head and throat. The rest of their bodies are striped and dotted in whites and blacks, with some variation between adult males and females.

The one that visits us hops up the trunk of our fruit trees, pecking at a few spots in a desultory way, then moves abruptly to another fruit tree. The behavior reminds me of a preschool child picking at the food on her plate before leaping up to play. Gleaning insects out of bark isn't the bird's main diet.

Sapsuckers are woodpeckers with distinctive eating habits. They drill multiple neat holes in trees just deep enough to reach the cambium (the sap-conveying living part of the tree). As the little puncture wounds fill with sap, they lap the liquid up with a tongue containing hair-like projections that hold liquid well.

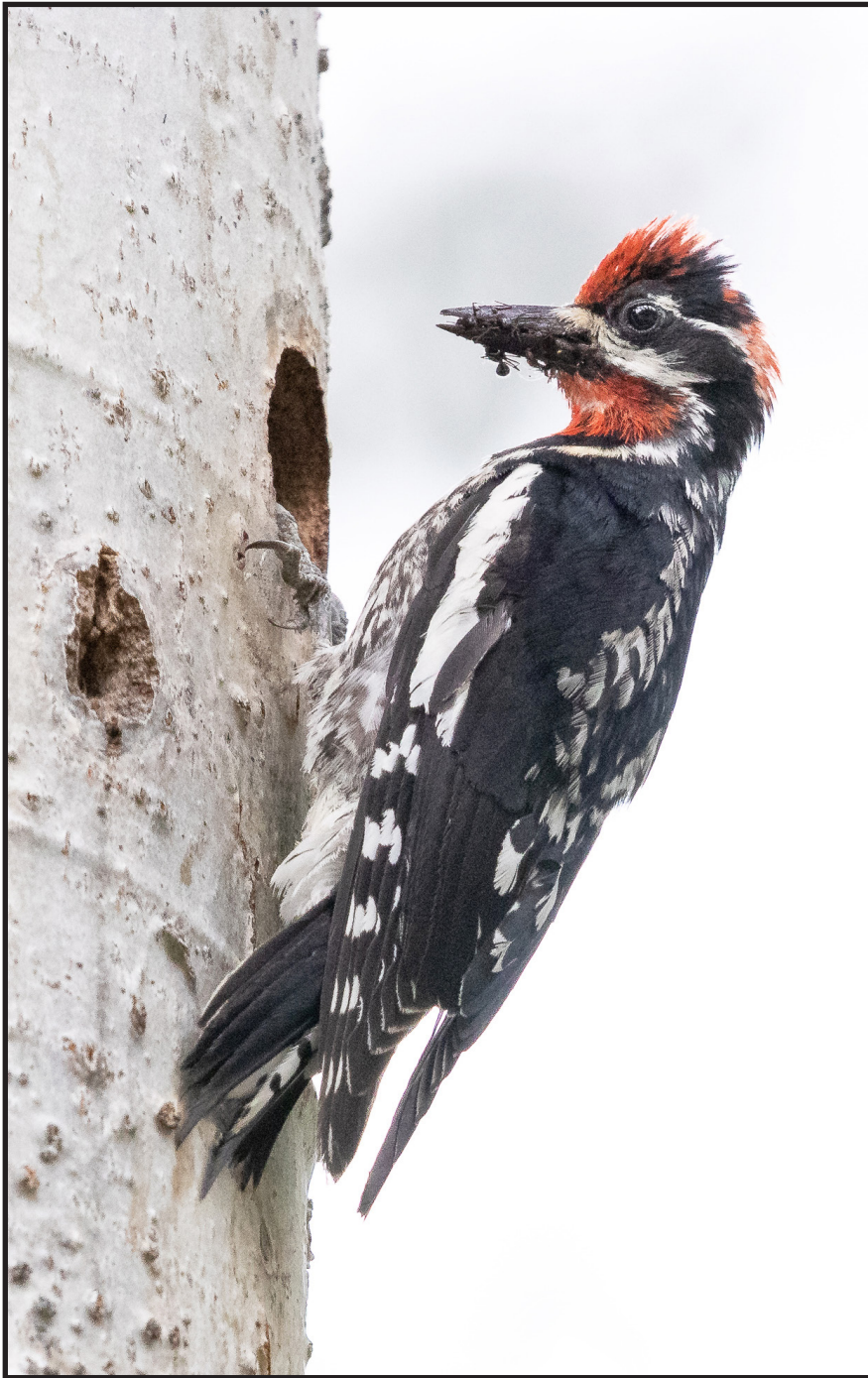
Sapsuckers will also eat the insects that are attracted by the sap, and occasionally insects out of the air or in the bark of trees.

Sapsuckers' drumming pattern also distinguishes them from other woodpeckers. When you hear drumming that slows down at the end as if the bird were tiring, that's a sapsucker. The other woodpeckers, like flickers and hairy woodpeckers,



An adult sapsucker on a tree with the multiple sap "wells" he had excavated. Alternatively, though not as often, these birds will also eat seeds and berries, and sometimes even catch insects mid-air.

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Ready to feed the chicks! Sometimes chicks can be very aggressive with their parents when in want of food (hangry perhaps?). Their cheeps and calls when hungry are also widely noted as impressive, both for their volume and repetition.



A chick shortly before leaving the nest. These chicks, and their adults, are often mistaken for their Yellow-bellied and Red-breasted counterparts, which were though to be the same species up until 1983.

drum with a steady, rapid beat throughout. Drumming, used for signaling territory or advertising for a mate, differs from pecking for food, which is irregular and much quieter.

A few years ago, I found a sapsucker nest in June by walking through aspen forests listening for the sounds of chicks cheeping to be fed. Once I located

the sound, patient observations revealed a mated pair of red-naped sapsucker adults shuttling food to the nest every five minutes. Amusingly, the chicks never stopped cheeping on any of my multiple visits — not before being fed, during feeding or in the intervals between feedings.

My wife and I kept such frequent tabs on the nest that we

even got to see the chicks fledge. They would stick their heads out of the nest for minutes on end, then suddenly throw themselves into the air, flap madly, and land awkwardly on a nearby branch. There they would hang for a minute or two, as if stunned by what just happened, before subsequently regaining their wits and flying to a more stable

branch. I've never actually seen any other bird species at the moment of leaving the nest, so I was very glad our "stakeout" paid off.

When he retired in 2013, Peter Bauer moved from Wenatchee to Winthrop for the snowy winters and closeness to nature. His blog, "American Safari," celebrating the beauty of the animal world (mostly birds), can be found at pbauwa.wordpress.com.