

Northern Flicker

Colaptes auratus



The northern flicker is the only member of the woodpecker species with a brown-colored back. It is the only woodpecker that feeds on the ground.

Northern Pineywoods

Northern Flicker

Colaptes auratus



APPEARANCE

Height: 12 to 13 inches (30 to 33 cm)

Wingspan: 18 to 21 inches (45 to 53 cm)

Distinguishing Characteristics

- Gray-brown back with dark spots and a red crescent at the nape of the neck
- Pale breast with black spots
- Crescent-shaped patch at the base of the throat
- White rump
- Yellow breast and undersides of their wings (but red in western populations)
- Downward curving bill
- White rump patch flashes as it flies, hence, "flicker."
- Feeds on the ground

LIFE HISTORY

Range: The "yellow-shafted flicker" (yellow under wings) migrates from Alaska to Nicaragua. In parts of Texas, they are year-round residents. The "red-shafted flicker" (red under wings) migrates shorter distances.

Diet: Ants and other insects, nuts, fruit and seeds

Predators: Raccoons, feral cats, hawks

Sexual maturity: One year

Mating season: February through July

Nests: Excavated in dead trees or dead portions of living trees, generally 6 to 20 feet (1.8 to 6 m) above the ground, but as high as 100 feet (30 m); entrance to the nest is 2.75 inches (7 cm) in diameter.

Eggs: Usually five to eight

Incubation: 11 to 16 days

Young: Young leave the nest about four weeks after hatching. Under ideal conditions, two broods may be raised in one season.

Life span: Up to 12 years

HABITAT

Flickers like woodlands, especially where dead or partially dead trees for nesting sites can be found. Northern flickers tend to avoid unbroken or dense forests, preferring to forage for food in open areas.

BEHAVIOR

Northern flickers are *diurnal* (most active during the daylight hours). Although diurnal, these birds tend to migrate at night, with weather determining both migration rates and departure dates. When mating, the males flash their bright bellies, breasts and rump patches, flap their wings, and swing their heads back and forth. Northern flickers will take advantage of an existing nest site or man-made nest boxes. Both parents contribute to nest construction and incubation.

NOW YOU KNOW!

- The genus name *Colaptes* is from the Greek word *colapt* and means "peck," which is, after all, what woodpeckers do best.
- The species, *auratus*, is from the Latin root *aurat*, meaning "gold" or "golden" and refers to its underwing.

NORTHERN FLICKERS AND PEOPLE

In the Civil War (1860-1865), Confederate soldiers from Alabama were called "Yellowhammers" because of the yellow cloth on their uniforms. It apparently reminded other soldiers of the underwings of "yellowhammers" or northern flickers.

Once common across much of the United States, northern flicker populations appear to be falling. Loss of suitable feeding and nesting sites due to logging and development are no doubt making an impact on this species. Northern flickers' fondness of ants has created another problem—a number of them have died after consuming ants contaminated with insecticides. One northern flicker's stomach contained almost 2,000 ants.