

# PICIFORMES

(Woodpeckers)

## Woodpeckers



# Family PICIDAE (Woodpeckers)

## Ladder-Backed Woodpecker (*Dryobates scalaris*)



Dolan Springs, Arizona



Floyd Lamb SP; LV, NV



Oak Creek; RRCNCA; NV



First Creek; RRCNCA; NV

### Measurements:

Length: 7" Wing Span: 13"

Average Weight: 1 oz

### Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

plumage (bold black-and-white bands on back and flanks); fairly long black bill; continuous white nape and eyeline; thin black band surrounding white cheek (comparisons to Nuttall's Woodpecker, page 3); buffy white, mottled, throat and undersides; genders similar, except crown: (m) red; (f) black

### Notes:

common; solitary; diurnal; inhabits desert scrub to pinyon-juniper woodlands below 6000' throughout sw US from TX/OK west to se CA/s NV south to Central America; before 2015, placed in the genus *Picoides*; insectivorous, drilling for wood-boring insects in trees, cacti, yuccas, etc.

Mojave presence: year-round

### Comments:

The most common of woodpeckers in the Mojave, the ladder backed can be encountered throughout the year, as indicated by these two fliers: the male on the left in June, 2019; the female at right, December, 2018. Both were photographed at the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area in southern Nevada.





# Family PICIDAE (Woodpeckers)

## Nuttall's Woodpecker (*Dryobates nuttallii*)



### Measurements:

Length: 7" Wing Span: 13"

Average Weight: 1.4 oz

### Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

plumage (bold black-and-white bands on back); short black bill; black forehead, face with thin white bands; fluffy, buffy lores; white throat; pale undersides with black bands/spots on flanks; genders similar, except crown: (m) red and black; (f) full black

### Notes:

uncommon; solitary (monogamous in pairs); native to riparian, wooded, and suburban areas in CA south to northern Baja, MEX (rare elsewhere) at elevations below 6000'; before 2015, placed in the genus *Picoides*; insectivorous, drilling for wood-boring insects, larvae, ants, etc., occasionally also tree sap; monogamous

Mojave presence: rare

### Comments:

The nuttall is a rare visitor to regions outside its usual range throughout California. However, an occasional visitor is spotted elsewhere, such as the female (left) in Pine Canyon near Dolan Springs, AZ, in February of 2022, and another female (right) at the Overton Wildlife Management Area in Nevada in September of 2020. Perhaps the girls are just looking for fresh territory.



Overton WMA; Overton, NV



Overton WMA; Overton, NV



## Quick Comparison

### Ladder-Backed Woodpecker

male: full red crown

bold, black-and-white, ladder-like barring on back

black rectangular band surrounding white cheek

barring on back extends to white neck

straight chisel-shaped bill

### Nuttall's Woodpecker

male: red on back of crown

bold, black-and-white, ladder-like barring on back

black face with thin white bands

barring on back ends at solid black band below white neck

shorter chisel-shaped bill

# Family PICIDAE (Woodpeckers)

## Downy Woodpecker (Dryobates pubescens)



Bosque del Apache NWR; NM



Bosque del Apache NWR; NM

### Measurements:

Length: 6.5" Wing Span: 12"

Average Weight: 1 oz

### Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

small size; black above with **white bar** down middle of back; black face with white bar above and below black eyes; white undersides, black tail, black spots on white outer tail feathers; short bill; **(m)** **red patch** behind black crown; **(f)** **no red patch**

### Notes:

common; solitary; found in woodlands, urban areas, etc., throughout most of NA; before 2015, placed in the genus **Picoides**; smallest woodpecker in NA; 7 subspecies; despite appearances, not closely related to the **Hairy Woodpecker** (similarities due to convergent evolution); insectivorous, probing trees for insects, larvae, etc.

Mojave presence: rare

### Comments:

In the field, very difficult to distinguish from the **Hairy Woodpecker**, unless one is afforded an unusually close and unobstructed view--which is quite rare as both species prefer to remain securely ensconced high in the protection of the forest. The downy is smaller, but size comparisons are unreliable in the field aside from fortuitous circumstances!

## Quick Comparison

### Downy Woodpecker

smaller size

black tail; black spots on white outer tail feathers

bill **shorter** than head length

### Hairy Woodpecker

larger size

black tail; **no** spots on white outer tail feathers

bill about **same length** as head



# Family PICIDAE (Woodpeckers)

## Hairy Woodpecker (*Leuconotopicus villosus*)

### Measurements:

Length: 9" Wing Span: 15"

Average Weight: 2.5 oz

### Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

medium size; black above with **white bar** down middle of back; white, unmarked undersides; large, straight bill, black eyes; **(m)** **red patch** on back of crown; **(f)** **no red** on crown

### Notes:

common; solitary; resident in mature, higher-elevation forests throughout most of NA south into Central America; before 2015, placed in the genus **Picooides**; 17 subspecies; despite appearances, not closely related to the **Downy Woodpecker** (similarities due to convergent evolution); insectivorous, probing trees for insects, larvae, fruit, nuts and seeds, sap, etc.

Mojave presence: rare

### Comments:

In the field, very difficult to distinguish from the **Downy Woodpecker**, unless one is afforded an unusually close and unobstructed view--which is quite rare as both species prefer to remain securely ensconced high in the protection of the forest. The hairy is larger, but size comparisons are unreliable in the field unless both birds are seen together.

### Comments:

The black face with white bars above and below the eye, a conspicuous white bar down the middle of the back, but **no** spotting on the outer white tail feathers reveals this bird as a Hairy Woodpecker. The individual shown here was photographed along the **Bristlecone Trail** in the Lee Canyon area of the Spring Mountains west of Las Vegas, NV. Note the red spot in the **center** of the crown ... this fellow happens to be a **juvenile** of the species.



Kaibab Lake; Williams, AZ



Lee Cyn; Spring Mtns; NV



South Rim; Grand Canyon NP



Kaibab Lake; Williams, AZ



# Family **PICIDAE** (Sapsuckers)

## Williamson's Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus thyroideus*)

### Measurements:

Length: 9" Wing Span: 17"

Average Weight: 1. oz

### Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

medium size; black bill; (m) iridescent black overall with large white wing patches; 2 white stripes on face; red chin, bright yellow belly; (f) duller black with fine barring on back and undersides; brown head; pale yellow belly; pale facial markings; no red on chin

### Notes:

uncommon; mostly solitary, except for small migrating flocks; inhabits mountain woodlands of western NA from central MEX north through the Rockies and Coast Ranges to British Columbia, CAN; 2 subspecies; diet consists of various insects (ants, beetles, etc), berries, tree sap, phloem (inner bark); genders distinctly dimorphic (once thought to be different species!)

Mojave presence: migratory; rare

### Comments:

The female above right is thus far the only member of this species that I have ever seen. I encountered her on a cross-country trip that included a brief stop at Lily Lake in [Rocky Mountain National Park](#) in 2021. Though rare in the Mojave Desert region, it has been observed in the higher elevations of the [Spring Mountains National Recreation Area](#) and the [Desert National Wildlife Refuge](#) in southern Nevada.



Lily Lk; Rocky Mtn NP; CO



Lily Lk; Rocky Mtn NP; CO



# Family **PICIDAE** (Sapsuckers)

## Red-Naped Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus nuchalis*)

### Measurements:

Length: 8" Wing Span: 22"

Average Weight: 1.5 oz

### Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

black upperbody with 2 longitudinal rows of white barring, pale undersides; **bold white** coverts; **red** crown, nape, throat; black face with distinct white stripe curving from base of small bill to breast; little gender dimorphism: (f) looks like male, plus **white chin**

### Notes:

uncommon; mostly solitary; prefers canyons, mountain woodlands (occasional visitor to urban areas) throughout interior western NA from CAN south to MEX (generally breeds in the northern part of range, migrating south for winter); no subspecies; distinguished from closely related **Red-Bellied Sapsucker** by range, which barely overlaps; "sapsucker" refers to woodpeckers that actually subsist mainly on tree sap, but they also will eat insects that are attracted to the sap, plus berries and seeds

**Mojave presence:** migratory; some year-round

### Comments:

Being relatively uncommon, these sapsuckers are seldom encountered, except--apparently--when you don't have a camera with you ... then, of course, they're all over the place! But, even when a camera is at hand, getting good pictures is not an easy task. Like most woodpeckers, excluding **Northern Flickers**, they're rather camera shy, and remain high in trees, obstructed by foliage. However, determination and perseverance often pays off, as the birds do move around a lot, offering a fleeting clear shot, such as this male at Willow Spring in the **Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area** west of Las Vegas, Nevada, in October of 2017.



LV Municipal GC; LV, NV



Willow Spring; RRCNCA; NV





# Family PICIDAE (Flickers)

## Red-Shafted Northern Flicker (Colaptes auratus cafer)

### Measurements:

Length: 13" Wing Span: 20"

Average Weight: 4.5 oz

### Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

large size; gray-brown with black bars on back, wings; paler breast with black spots; **red underwings** and under tail; primary feathers have **red shafts**; black, **triangular** breast band; long, slightly curved bill; **(m)** **gray crown**; brownish mask; gray cheeks and throat; **red "moustache"** (malar); **(f)** duller head plumage; lacks red malar

### Notes:

common; mostly solitary, pairs generally monogamous; subspecies found in open wooded environments of **western NA** (the species as a whole extends throughout NA, Cuba, and parts of Central America); 9 extant subspecies, described mainly by range; only woodpecker that routinely forages on the ground for ants and other insects, while also enjoying occasional berries, nuts, seeds, etc.; named for the way it flicks its long tongue to catch prey

**Mojave presence:** winter range; some year-round

### Comments:

This subspecies is named for its distinctively red feather shafts, as opposed to yellow of the, obviously, **Yellow-Shafted Northern Flicker**. The female on the left revealed herself in full wing in October, 2018, at Corn Creek in the **Desert NWR**; the female on the right, playing through in November of 2018 at **Bear's Best Golf Course** in Las Vegas.

Fortunately for wildlife photographers, these large woodpeckers are not shy of a camera, and will patiently pose to the full delight of admirers! They are often seen on the ground like the male at left (unusual for woodpeckers), or perched on an unobstructed tree branch, as performed by the female at right, both at Corn Creek in October of 2020.



Corn Creek; Desert NWR; NV



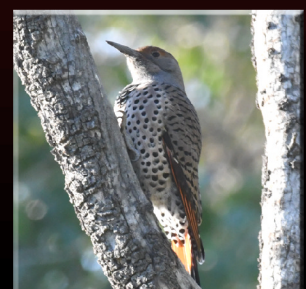
Henderson BVP; Hend., NV



Bear's Best GC; LV, NV



Clark Co. Wetlands Pk; LV, NV





# Family **PICIDAE** (Flickers)

## Gilded Flicker (*Colaptes chrysoides*)

### Measurements:

Length: 11" Wing Span: 19"

Average Weight: 3.5 oz

### Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

large size; gray-brown above with black bars on back and wings; paler breast with black spots; **yellow underwings** and under tail; primary feathers have **yellow shafts**; black, **oval** breast band; long, slightly curved bill; **(m) amber crown**; gray cheeks, neck, throat; **red "moustache"** (malar); **(f)** duller head plumage; lacks red malar

### Notes:

common in limited range; solitary (pairs generally monogamous); found in riparian woodlands, desert scrublands, saguaro cactus habitats, etc., in the e Mojave (CA/NV/AZ) south through the Sonoran Desert into MEX, including Baja peninsula; 4 subspecies; forages mainly on the ground for ants, etc.

**Mojave presence:** year-round (eastern region)

### Comments:

This flicker is easy to confuse with the **Northern Flicker** (especially the yellow-shafted variety), until you see it in flight when its bright yellow underwings (left) and feather shafts (right) become conspicuous, such as displayed by these two in Dolan Springs, AZ, in January of 2023. It does not have the black malar and red crescent on the nape that the yellow-shafted possesses.

The birds shown on this page represent the subspecies **C. c. mearnsi**, the **Mearns' Gilded Flicker**. Unlike the other three subspecies that thrive in Mexico and make their home in saguaro cacti, these gildededs have adapted to such habitats as the scrubland (left) and Joshua (right) characteristic of the Mojave Desert.



Dolan Springs, Arizona



Dolan Springs, Arizona



Dolan Springs, Arizona



Dolan Springs, Arizona

