

Profile

Downy Woodpecker

Picoides pubescens



Downy Woodpeckers are North America's smallest woodpeckers, about six inches long and weighing less than an ounce.

The chest and back are white, wings are black with white spots, and the tail is mostly black with a trace of white on the sides. The head is black with a white mustache and "eyebrow," and the male has a red patch on the back of its head. A whitish tuft of feathers at the base of the short, thick, bill keeps debris out of the nostrils when drilling. The bill is only about half as long as the head as opposed to the Hairy Woodpecker whose bill is much longer than the head.

As with other woodpeckers, the male is larger than the female. He chisels deep into wood with his longer, stronger bill, while the female pries under the bark with her shorter bill. This way, each one of the pair can share food resources without competing with the other.

The diet is about three-fourths insect, which benefits humans because most of those insects are considered destructive to orchards and forest products. With their special chisel-like bills and sticky, recurved barbed tongues, Downies are adept at plucking out great numbers of beetle grubs, insect cocoons, or batches of insect eggs. The remainder of the diet is berries and seeds.

Downies are non-migratory and are solitary except during courting season, but they occasionally forage in loose association with other small birds.

Males defend a territory against other males, and females defend a territory against females. Initially, a pair will hold a large territory, but it shrinks after a nest site is selected and excavated. When an intruder enters a Downy Woodpecker's territory, the resident woodpecker uses threat displays such as wing flicking, or fanning the tail, raising the crest and holding the bill high.

Downy Woodpeckers form monogamous breeding pairs in late winter. Courting and territorial displays include dancing (a side-to-side "weaving" motion while balancing on the tips of the tail), drumming, bill waving, crest raising, and a floating butterfly-like flight. Courtship also includes duet singing.

Both male and female excavate the nesting hole, which can take up to two weeks to dig out. They generally prefer dead or dying wood, and there is a correlation between the density of Downies and the number of dead trees in an area. Optimal habitats contain five or more suitable snags per acre; habitats without such snags are not used.

The entrance hole, one and a quarter inches in diameter, is just large enough to admit the bird's body and is perfectly circular. The nesting cavity is roughly gourd-shaped, turning downward and widening soon after penetrating the wood, and extending to a depth varying from eight to twelve inches.

Both parents incubate the 4 to 5 eggs for about 12 days, and both feed the

young. The young leave the nest after about three weeks, but they follow the parents around for a few weeks more. Each pair typically raises one brood a year, but birds in southern locations may raise two broods.

The young woodpeckers are hatched naked and blind. During the first few critical days after hatching, adults take turns in the cavity, one brooding while the other gathers food. The male usually broods at night.

Once the young have fledged, the parents divide the brood and only take care of their individual charges. The male will usually take one or two of the young and the female takes the others.

The most common sound Downy Woodpeckers make is rapid drumming on tree trunks, branches and hollow logs. The drumming sound tapers slightly toward the end. Other adult sounds include a sharp, high-pitched "pik-pik" and a shrill "whinny" with a descending tone.

INTERESTING FACTS...

- The tongue is twice as long as the Downy's head.
- The outer hind toe is longer than the rest of the toes to help keep the bird from swaying when perched.
- Males often feed in the tops of trees on branches that are small in diameter while females feed midlevel and lower on larger diameter branches.
- In the wild, Downies live 2-5 years.