



Northern Flicker – Biology and Damage Management

Dr. Nicki Frey and Steve Zanoni, Utah State University Extension

Identification and Biology

The northern flicker (*Colaptes auratus*) is a large woodpecker (11-12 inches). Unlike many other common woodpeckers, it has a black and tan speckled back, with a black and white spotted belly that gives it an overall brownish appearance. Upon

closer inspection one will notice it has a black breast band and a white rump. In the west, the northern flicker has a grey face, and the males have a red “mustache.” In flight, one can see red coloration under the wings, and a white patch on their rump. The eastern version of the northern



Figure 1: Clockwise from left, western coloration of northern flicker (photocredit Mick Thompson), eastern coloration of northern flicker (photocredit Desert Hills Gardens), and female northern flicker (photocredit Lucina M). All photos from Flickr Commons.

flicker has a brown face, red markings on the back of its head, yellow coloration under the wings, and the males have a black mustache. Females are a mix of buff and gray colors, and are sometimes confused with mourning doves (Fig. 1). The northern flicker is found year-round throughout the United States, parts of Canada, and Mexico. Flickers can be found in any habitat that has a few trees that can be used for cavities, particularly in the suburban woodlands, but prefers open, wooded areas. Flickers are known to migrate from the northern part of their range to the southern part for winter each year.

The northern flicker spends most of its time on the ground where it uses its down curved bill to root out ants, its predominant food source, and other insects. Flickers have a long barbed tongue that it uses to capture and eat insects out of the holes that it pecks in wood. In the fall, flickers will also eat nuts, berries and other fruit. Like other woodpeckers, flickers will climb trees and drum on objects. They also nest in cavities in trees 5-20 feet off the ground. Both the male and the female help to excavate the nest. Once the female lays 5-8 eggs, the pair will take turns incubating the eggs for about 15 days. The young leave the cavity about 4 weeks after hatching.

Sources of Conflict

[Drumming](#) and drilling holes are the two most common problems people will encounter with the northern flicker. Drumming is used as a means of attracting a mate, communication, and defending their territory. Drumming is caused by the flicker hitting its beak repeatedly against a tree, log, or any other object that will amplify the sound. Northern flickers ordinarily won't create holes when drumming! When drumming they prefer a loud hollow object that will project their call the farthest distance. Home owners can often observe a flicker drumming on metal gutters or drain pipes. When a drumming object is successful for a male flicker he will return to it year after year. While their drumming may most often be a source of loud noise in the spring, it can cause damage when the drumming occurs on siding, eaves, and roofs.

Northern flickers drill holes in wood to find insects and other invertebrates. When a northern flicker starts drilling small holes in siding or other wood surfaces it is usually a sign of an insect infestation. Food holes drilled by a flicker are usually about the size of a dime and drilled in straight horizontal lines (Figure 2). A flicker will

also drill a hole for a nest cavity. This hole will be roughly the size of the flicker itself. Flickers usually select dead trees that are soft inside to excavate to create a hole. Sometimes, they may be attracted to wood siding or wood shingles on a home as a potential place to build a cavity (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Flicker foraging holes in wood siding. Photo credit: www.evergreenexpert.com



Figure 3. Example of flicker nesting attempts in a home, and Mylar ribbons hung to scare away the bird. Photo credit:

Managing Damage

Northern flickers, and all woodpeckers, are protected by the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act; therefore, lethal control of northern flickers is not usually an option when considering what methods to use to reduce damage. There are several non-lethal ways to manage flicker behavior, including frightening devices, exclusion, and natural diversions. However, scaring a flicker away from an active nesting cavity (one with eggs or live young) is illegal! The most effective strategies combine 2 or more methods. While other methods have been reported, such as banging pots and pans, or squirting the bird with a water pistol, these methods are not long-term solutions, require a person to be

present, and will not deter a bird that is acclimated to a suburban or urban setting. We present methods that can be initiated by a homeowner, but then require only maintenance to be effective.

- **Frightening/Repelling:** There are many devices advertised as successful at scaring away birds, including woodpeckers. Most are seldom effective. The best frightening devices will only work for a limited time and only if the flicker hasn't already become attached to the object. In a study conducted in New York (Harding et al., 2007), Irri-Tape™ (Bird-X Inc.) was the only frightening device that consistently worked to reduce or eliminate woodpecker activity around a home.
 - Hang Mylar tape, Irri-Tape™, or balloons in the vicinity of the flicker activity. Place the tape so that it can move in the breeze and reflect sunlight erratically. A common method is to hang a string along the side of the house receiving activity, then tie the flagging or balloons at regular intervals along the string (Figure 3).
 - There has been some reported success from motion active devices that sound a distress call, followed by a predator's cry, such as a hawk. Cornell Lab of Ornithology suggests BirdXPeller is one possible device. However, a study on pileated woodpeckers (*Dryocopus pileatus*), another species of large woodpecker, did not find that noise devices were effective at reducing damage (Tupper et al., 2011).
 - Models of predators such as owls, hawks, and snakes are ineffective.
 - Chemical repellants applied to wood siding or wood structures have not been found to be effective at reducing woodpecker damage.
- **Exclusion:** Many effective methods are those that prohibit the flicker from accessing the target area.
 - Preventing access to an area can be accomplished by covering it up with a sheet, tarp, burlap or netting (Figure 4).
 - ¾ inch plastic mesh netting can be installed over an area, leaving 3" of space between the netting and the damaged surface so that the woodpecker's bill cannot reach through the netting to the house.
 - Netting should be installed tight, so that it does not flap, or become tangled, which might accidentally trap a bird.
 - If there are only a couple small target areas, hardware cloth or sheet metal can be attached over the target area.
 - If an active nest cavity is found wait until after the family group leaves the nest and then close it up before other critters start to use the cavity.
- **Drumming sounds** may be dulled by placing a soft cloth or blanket under the area where the drumming occurs, or temporarily filling in a targeted pipe with cloth (remember to remove this during rain!).
Diversion: A natural way to prevent flicker activity on your house, whether it be drumming or drilling, is to create access to natural elements that can be used, while using exclusion and frightening methods.
 - Allow more snags, or dead standing trees in the area. Flickers will use them for drumming and nesting, and snags are great places for them to find insects.
 - If no dead trees are in the area another option is to provide a nest boxes, this may be more attractive to the flicker than attempting to build a cavity nest in your house. Make sure that you purchase a nest box that has a removable panel, in the event you need to remove other species' nests from the box. The nest box should have a 3-inch hole, about 3 inches from the top of the box, and a total box depth of 18 inches.
 - If Northern flickers are looking to a house as a food source, consider hanging a suet bird feeder in your yard. This is a food source for woodpeckers that can be placed in a suitable location.
 - If Northern flickers are looking to a house as a food source, one should consider contracting the services of a pest-control company to remove insects from the siding or walls of the house or other structure. After insects are removed, properly sealing the wood siding will prevent further insect infestations and future Northern flicker use.

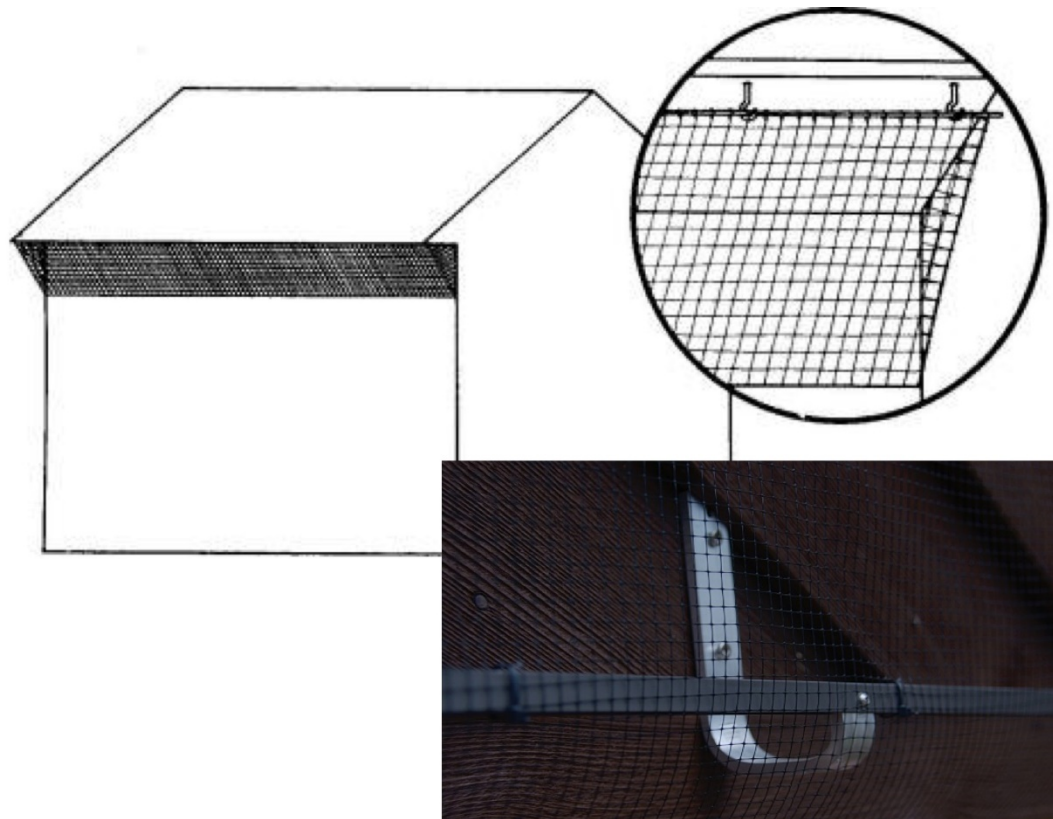


Figure 4. Example of mesh wire placement to exclude flicker excavation. Photo credit: Rex Marsh, <http://icwdm.org/handbook/birds/woodpeckers.asp>

References

- Belant, J. L., Seamans, T. W., Dolbeer, R. A., & Woronecki, P. P. (1997). Evaluation of methyl anthranilate as a woodpecker repellent. *International Journal of Pest Management* 43:59-62.
- Cornell Lab of Ornithology All About Birds Bird Guide. (2016). Northern Flicker. Retrieved from https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern_Flicker/id
- Cornell Lab of Ornithology. 2016. Woodpecker control methods. Retrieved from http://www.birds.cornell.edu/wp_about/control.html
- Harding, E. G., Curtis, P. D., & Vehrehcamp, S. L. (2007). Assessment of management techniques to reduce woodpecker damage to homes. *Journal of Wildlife Management* 71: 2061-2066.
- Jasumback, T., Bate, L., & Oravetz, S. (1999). How to prevent woodpeckers from damaging buildings. Rep. 0071-2847-MTDC. Missoula, MT: US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Missoula Technology and Development Center. 10 pages. Retrieved from <http://www.fs.fed.us/t-d/pubs/pdfpubs/pdf00712847/pdf00712847dpi300.pdf>
- Sibley, D. (2014). *The Sibley guide to birds* (Second ed.). New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Tupper, S. K., Cummings, J. L., Andelt, W. F., Werner, S. J., & Harness, R. E. (2011). Evaluation of Sonic Dissuader R to reduce damage by pileated woodpeckers. *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 35: 40-44.
- Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. (2016). Living With Wildlife: Woodpeckers. Retrieved from <http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/woodpeckers.html>
- Utah State University is committed to providing an environment free from harassment and other forms of illegal discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40 and older), disability, and veteran's status. USU's policy also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and academic related practices and decisions. Utah State University employees and students cannot, because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran's status, refuse to hire; discharge; promote; demote; terminate; discriminate in compensation; or discriminate regarding terms, privileges, or conditions of employment, against any person otherwise qualified. Employees and students also cannot discriminate in the classroom, residence halls, or in on/off campus, USU-sponsored events and activities. This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Ken White, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University.