



By Ron Ketter

Northern Flicker

(Editor's note: Ron Ketter is a member of the Talbot Bird Club and a Maryland Ornithological Society board member.)

October brings a wide range of autumn colors, with trees turning all shades of red, yellow, orange and brown. The warm palette of Northern Flicker colors fits right in.

Our second largest woodpecker in the United States (only the Pileated Woodpecker is larger), Northern Flickers have an overall brown appearance. They have a white patch on their rump, conspicuous in flight and often visible when perched on the ground or a tree.

Other field marks include an off-white underside with bold black spots on their breast and belly. They have a black crescent on the upper breast.

Northern Flickers can be found year-round on the Eastern Shore. Their range expands across the entire continental United States, into most of Canada and interior Alaska. During the winter, those breeding in Canada and Alaska move into



Adult males have a stripe that looks like a mustache, called a malar stripe, that extends from the corner of their mouth to the top of their throat.

(Photo by Ron Ketter)

the lower 48 states and into Mexico. They can also be found in Cuba and the Grand Cayman Islands.

Ornithologists have identified four sub-species of Northern Flickers, with two found in the United States. The Yellow-Shafted Northern Flicker is found in the eastern United States. The shafts of its flight feathers are bright yellow.

The Red-Shafted subspecies is in the western United States, with bright red shafts on its flight feathers.

The other two subspecies are the Cuban Northern Flicker and the Grand Cayman Northern Flicker, found on their namesake islands.

Both are similar in appearance to the Yellow-Shafted subspecies.

The males and females are similar in appearance except for one major difference. Adult males have a stripe that looks like a mustache, called a malar stripe, that extends from the corner of their mouth to the top of their throat. The malar stripe is black on the Yellow-Shafted male and red on the Red-Shafted male.

Northern Flickers spend a lot of time on the ground. They mainly eat ants and beetles, using their long, slightly curved bill to dig through soil. They often hammer at the ground in a similar fashion as other woodpeckers drill into wood



in search of insects. During the winter, they supplement their diet with fruits and seeds.

During breeding season, Northern Flickers excavate nest cavities, selecting the trunks or large branches in dead or diseased trees.

Both sexes participate in the excavation, constructing an opening about 3 inches in diameter and a cavity about 15 inches deep. The cavity is widest at the bottom, making room for eggs and chicks. Unlike other woodpeckers, Northern Flickers may reuse nests.

Northern Flickers have several distinct calls. The first is the long call that can be described as a series

of evenly spaced, single “*kick, kick, kick, kick ...*” notes, repeated at a rate of about six to seven notes per second and lasting an average of about five seconds.

However, the call can extend much longer, with the maximum duration for a recorded call lasting over 19 seconds. These calls are most commonly heard in spring to establish territories and attract mates.

The second call is a single note peah call that lasts only a fraction of a second. This call is a quick note that descends downward. This call serves several purposes, such as signaling to a mate that it’s time to

switch nest care duties or summoning help to confront a predator or threat to the nest.

The third, and most complex, is the wicka call. It is more subdued and often given in unison when a pair, trio, or sometimes even a quartet of Northern Flickers are in close proximity. It is a series of alternating notes, modulated between a higher, louder note followed by a softer, quieter one. It is sometimes described as “wik-a, wik-a, wik-a” or “ta-week, ta-week, ta-week...” It lasts around 4 seconds.

Although still widespread and considered common, Northern Flickers’ numbers have been declining over the last half century, resulting in about a 50 percent decline since the mid-1960s. This decline is likely due to a combination of factors, including nest-site competition from European Starlings, habitat loss including the loss of large diameter dead and diseased trees, and pesticide use.

Their decline is particularly concerning because Northern Flickers are considered a keystone species where they nest.

Their nesting cavities are used by a variety of other species, so their decline can have a ripple effect on other birds.

While Northern Flickers don’t typically visit bird feeders, they often visit back yards and bird baths. During the winter months, they are abundant in areas where they flock up, including open grasslands near woods, city parks, and near flooded swamps and marsh edges. Ways to conserve Northern Flickers include protecting standing dead trees and providing native habitat that supports their diet of ants and beetles.

