

FOR THE BIRDS

The Woodpecker Family

By T. Andersen

There are 22 species in the Woodpecker family of birds found in the United States. Seven species frequent Kinnickinnic Township. They range from the diminutive Downy to the outsized, prehistoric looking Pileated Woodpecker.

The birds in the Woodpecker family are cavity nesters. They make a nest in a tree by using their chisel shaped bill to carve out a hole just big enough to allow entry.

The little **Downy Woodpeckers** are the smallest and the most common Woodpecker we have. They reside here year around. They are really quite tame and will readily frequent bird feeders. Suet and sunflower seeds attract them easily.



Downy Woodpecker

The **Hairy Woodpecker** also resides here year around. They too are easily attracted to bird feeders. Like the Downy, the Hairy Woodpeckers are also found all across the U.S. They are a little shyer than the friendly Downy.

While the size difference is considerable between the Downy and Hairy, identification at first glance can be difficult. If they happen to be in close proximity to

one another, it is easier to ID them. The best way to positively ID them is to look at the size of the bill. The bill on the Hairy is the length, or nearly the length of the head. The Downy bill is much shorter.



Hairy Woodpecker

While not as widespread across North America, the **Red-bellied Woodpecker** is very common throughout Kinnickinnic Township. With that bright red top knot, they are sometimes mistaken for the Red-headed Woodpecker.



Red-bellied Woodpecker

The Red-bellied is one of our prettiest Woodpeckers. They are found mostly in the Eastern one half of the United States. Most sources show Kinnickinnic Township to be at the northern edge of the range where they are commonly found. The Red-bellied is a year around resident of Kinnickinnic Township



Red-bellied leaving the nest cavity in an Oak tree

Red-bellies are quite abundant here and are easy to bring to bird feeders. They love suet but will also come to sunflower seeds.



Red-bellied at the fly-through feeder

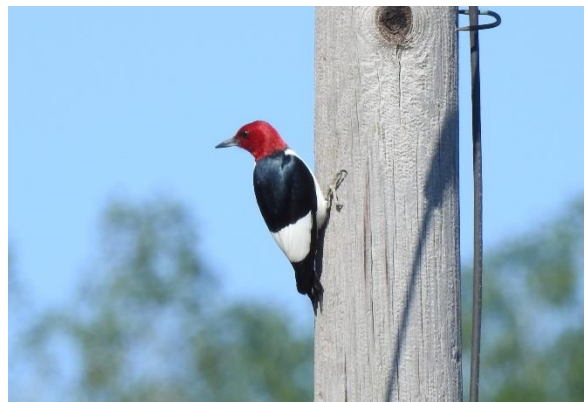
One might think the Red-bellied is misnamed because it is hard to see the red belly unless you are relatively close.



An immature Red-bellied Woodpecker

The **Red-headed Woodpecker** resides primarily in the Eastern portion of the U.S. They are not common in Kinnickinnic Township. They migrate a few states south of here in the winter. Unfortunately, their numbers are declining throughout their territory and are considered to be at risk. I have been encouraged to see more of them in the last few years.

Years ago I remember people saying that Red-headed Woodpeckers like to build nests in telephone poles. That is an unlikely scenario. They do, however, use telephone poles as convenient observation posts. On numerous occasions, I watched the woodpecker pictured below on the telephone pole. It would study the ground from the pole, spot an insect, and then fly down to grab it. Then it would fly back to the pole and repeat the process. They apparently have good eyesight as this particular bird was spotting grasshoppers thirty to 40 feet away.



Red-headed Woodpecker on an "observation post"

Red-headed Woodpeckers often feed on the ground. I have also watched them store food. They are a bird most at home in open country. Park areas or mowed fields are good choices for observing this bird. The pole that is pictured was adjacent to a mowed field. They will also visit bird feeders where suet is present.

A lucky Kinnickinnic Township birder had this Red-headed visiting the feeder regularly.



Red-headed (L) enjoying suet with an immature Red-bellied

The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker is primarily a bird of the Eastern U. S. and breeds into the far north of Canada. Most sources show our area as the Southern end of the breeding area. They migrate to the Southern U.S. and beyond in the winter. They are fairly common in Kinnickinnic Township.



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker eating sap from this tree

The Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers often go unnoticed and sometimes when they are seen, are thought to be just another Hairy woodpecker.

One thing is for sure, you can't miss their work on a tree. If you see this, you know they are in the area.



A Yellow-bellied Sapsucker's work

You don't often see the yellow belly on the Sapsucker. They're usually sitting motionless against a tree. The one below gave me a really good look at that yellow belly! As you can see, they are quite fond of suet. They visit our suet feeders, pictured below, regularly when they are present.



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker enjoying suet

The Northern Flicker is also a member of the Woodpecker family. They will frequent feeders for suet and can often be seen in

open areas (yards) foraging. In the fall you can often see small flocks of Flickers migrating south.



Sometimes Flickers will overwinter here. The bird pictured below spent the entire winter of 2022 in our woods. Thanks to water, sunflower seeds, suet, and a fly through feeder with a roof for it.



Northern Flicker in January 2022

The Northern Flicker is found all across the United States, to the far north in Canada and even in Alaska. If you are traveling to the Pacific Northwest, Northern Flickers are there but they have a red slash on the cheek instead of the Eastern version (ours) that has the black slash (black malar).

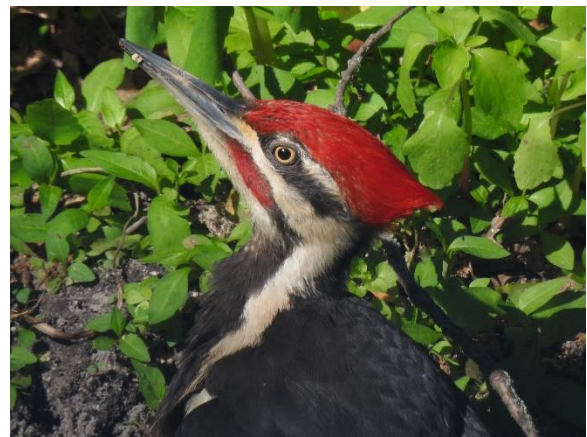
The last member of the Woodpecker family in these parts is impossible to miss. The Pileated Woodpecker has a wingspan of

almost thirty inches and sports a bright red top knot.



Pileated Woodpecker with the bright top knot

They are found in the Eastern half of the United States and much of Canada. They can also be found in the Pacific Northwest. They are permanent residents of Kinnickinnic Township.



Pileated Woodpecker

Most of our woodpeckers do not have a melodious song, yet they all make some sounds that can identify them. The Pileated call is not one you would miss or forget. Their high pitched *kekekekekekeke* call can be heard for a long way.

The Pileated likes to search dead trees for ants and they can make some very large excavations in their search. They can also

be seen feeding on the ground foraging for bugs especially on down logs and trees.



Pileated feeding on the ground

They will also frequent a suet feeder year-around. I had to rethink the use of a wooden suet feeder. I had a lovely homemade wooden suet feeder that a Pileated reduced to a pile of wood chips. Perhaps it was upset because I forgot to fill it with suet.



As big as the suet feeder

One of the interesting things about the Woodpecker family is how they extricate insects from the holes they make in trees. The members of this family have a long tongue. Several inches of long tongue! Not only that, the tongue is usually barbed and sticky. Note the picture below of this

Red-bellied Woodpecker. That tongue is reaching out to capture something.



Woodpeckers make a lot of noise drumming. Drumming, a woodpecker pounding away on a tree with its beak, is used for nest excavation, to find food, and also to advertise a territory. Starting in very early spring woodpeckers begin to drum to attract a mate or perhaps to declare a territory. Apparently, some birders can identify what species are drumming by the sound and cadence. I cannot, with the exception of the Pileated. When that one gets going on a dead tree, you know it. You'll also know it when a Flicker drums on your drain pipe (something they like to do).

The Woodpeckers are a welcome addition to Kinnickinnic Township. They give us a dash of color in the winter and entertain us year around at our bird feeders.

**Tom Andersen lives in Kinnickinnic Township
The Pictures are from Kinnickinnic Township**