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## **The northern flicker is Newfoundland's colorful woodpecker**



### **Birds I View**

#### **Bill Montevecchi**

Woodpeckers, those hard-headed birds that industriously pound and chisel their livelihoods from the garden trees and forests of Newfoundland, always attract attention. Of the nine species [including 3 vagrants] in Newfoundland, the northern flicker is the most common and arguably the most stunning.

The numbers of flickers in the area have been increasing over the past decade or more. They are now regular visitors to yards and suet feeders

In our area, northern flickers have long dark beaks, a gray crown and nape with an inverted red triangle at the back of the head. Their light brown backs are barred and their bellies are spotted with a black sash across the breast. Their large conspicuous white rump and magnificent yellow-shafted under-wings and tail feathers emblazon their undulating flight.

Formerly they were referred to as yellow-shafted flickers to differentiate them from their red-shafted western North American cousins by taxonomic splitters. Today their nomenclature is back in the court of the taxonomic lumpers, and they are currently grouped in a single species, the northern flicker.

Male and female woodpeckers often are distinguished by coloration on the head. For most species, red is the predominant male characteristic shown as small red patch at the back of the head as among male hairy and downy woodpeckers or on the forehead and throat of male yellow-bellied sapsuckers. Male black-backed and Arctic 3-toed woodpeckers wear bright yellow caps. Yet among flickers, both sexes don the crimson mark on the back of the head, so the sporty male dons a stylish black mustache that runs from the beak and along the brown cheek in contrast to the clean brown-cheeked female.

Being catholic in their diets, flickers feed on a variety of insects, grubs, berries and seeds. Often they forage on the ground and on the sides of houses searching for

insect larvae under shingles and gutters. Owing to these foraging habits, flickers tend to favor forest edges, pastures and residential areas. Their common exposure and exquisite features generate more inquiries from the general public than any other local bird.

Flickers like to make the presence known attracting mates and claiming territories with piercing “flick-a flick-a flick-a” calls than can be heard at considerable distances. Their loud rapid drumming serves similar purposes, and flickers often position themselves to achieve maximum amplification by pounding metal chimneys, telephone pole transformers and the sides of houses.

Flickers excavate nest cavities in dead or dead parts of trees (a good reason to preserve naturally untidy landscapes). These cavities can provide nests sites for owls and starlings that at times usurp them from flickers.

Abandoned or vacated cavities are occupied by secondary cavity nesters like tree swallows. Flickers also nest in boxes with larger holes and at times will enlarge the entrances of nest-boxes that interest them.

If you want to brighten the winter bird assemblage at your feeder, you can hang suet boxes and/or peanut butter in holed hanging logs. The flickers that visit our feeders are wary and shy, behavioral predispositions that serves them well as they are often the bright colorful targets of feeder-hunting sharp-shinned hawks.

### **Gannets return to Iceland in January**

In mid-January, thousands of gannets returned early and unexpectedly to Iceland. A video of hundreds of birds diving and gorging on herring just off the wharves in the harbour at Vestmannaeyjar in western Iceland can be found at - <http://vimeo.com/84361116>.

### **Birds in the area and around the province**

Cormorant numbers are rising. In early February, Bruce Mactavish counted 16 great cormorants in Bowring Park where they have been attracted by the trout in the duck pond. At the end of January, 6 great cormorants were on the rocks in Portugal Cove Harbour. The other local cormorant species – the double-crested – with the exception of a straggler or two at times, migrates out of the area in winter.

The hard freeze of early January stressed the local waterfowl as open areas in ponds shrank to small puddles. The bubbling system that keeps water open at Burton’s Pond on the MUN campus was off during the blackout reducing that option as well.

Diving ducks likely experienced maximum stress as they tend for the most part not to partake of food provided by feeders and depend on fishes, krill and aquatic vegetation for sustenance. It was difficult to imagine how the 100 or so tufted ducks and scaup in the small open water area on Burton’s Pond could sustain themselves. A dead female scaup on the ice that had been scavenged by gulls exemplified the struggles associated with winter survival.

In early February, a flock of about 150 greater scaup and a few lesser scaup were resting into Corner Brook Harbour near the outflow of the Humber River (Katie Arnott, Nick Montevecchi). Scaup and common and red-breasted mergansers are also wintering in the channel at Long Pond – Manuals (Linda Gaborko). Craig Northott captured some stunning photos of a pair of harlequin ducks and a northern eider on the shore rocks at Ramea in early January.

A wing-tagged herring gull at Quidi Vidi Lake photographed by Rick West was found to have been tagged on Gull Island in Witless Bay during the summer of 2012 (Alex Bond). This resident herring gull chose not to migrate away for the winter.

A beautifully barred juvenile snowy owl took up temporary residence in a St. John's neighborhood around Tunis Court. The bird spent the entire day Saturday 11 January atop Jim and Laura Tranquilla's house on Montgomery Street.

A mourning dove, a male hairy woodpecker and other local diners are enjoying the offerings at Pam Williams' feeders in St. Philips. In January pine grosbeaks were singing joyously in Portugal Cove and elsewhere, and flocks of pine siskins and robins were flying on the forested meadow edges below Beachy Cove Mountain (Janet Montevecchi). When the rains melted the snow flickers and robins were feeding on local lawns (Alison Harvey). In late January some robins were singing near Long Pond (John Wells). Is it winter or is it spring? Only day length will tell.

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