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Exploring Our Little Corner of the World with the Galiano Naturalists

by Richard Pitschka

Primary cavity excavators, birds that make nest holes in dead and dying trees, are increasingly becoming noticed as keystone species in wooded ecosystems because of the vital role they play in insect control and the creation of breeding habitat for other species of birds and mammals.

The Northern Flicker, a primary cavity excavator and a kind of woodpecker, is one of the more commonly sighted birds when traveling along Galiano's roadways. It is often first seen feeding on the shoulder of the road and then quickly flying toward the cover of nearby trees. A jay-sized bird, it appears to be a nondescript grey-brown bird in typical light, and it would be fairly difficult to identify as it flits away if it were not for a conspicuous white patch on its rump.

Seen close by or through a spotting scope, it is anything but dull. Its subtly-beautiful markings are accented by a bold black crescent on its breast, and when taking flight while being viewed from the side or the front, the flicker flashes bright colors from under its tail and wings. In the eastern part of its range, which covers nearly all of North America, these flashes of color are yellow. In the west, they are reddish.

These two forms of the Northern Flicker, the yellow-shafted flicker of the east and the red-shafted flicker of the west, were once thought to be two separate species. It is now known that they interbreed freely where their ranges come in contact, and in the plains states and provinces, there is a broad zone where all the flickers are intermediate forms.

The flicker is a generalist in its choice of food. At times eating fruits, berries, seeds or nuts, it subsists mainly on a diet of insects--especially ants. In fact, it spends more time eating ants than any other North American bird, which is one reason why it is so often encountered feeding on the ground.

Generally avoiding dense forests, the flicker is commonly found in open woodlands, woodlots, groves, towns, and semi-open country. It may even be found in very open country, provided there are a few trees scattered about.

Flickers lay their eggs in nest holes that they excavate themselves in dead and dying trees. They also excavate roosting cavities for use during cold weather. These nesting and roosting cavities are often reused by at least 21 other species of birds and mammals in BC that are less able or unable to excavate their own holes. On Galiano this list includes Brown Creepers, Vaux's Swifts, Tree Swallows, House Wrens, American Kestrels, and several species of bats. Most of these species are important predators of insects and therefore play significant roles in maintaining forest health.

Because excavation of nest holes is part of the courtship rituals of flickers, they usually make new holes each year, which means they leave lots of old holes behind for use by other species. Without flickers many of these species would find nesting holes in desperately short supply.

Although still fairly common in much of its range, the Northern Flicker has experienced serious declines since the 1960's. By 1991, the yellow-shafted form of the east had declined by over 50 percent and our western red-shafted form by about 20 percent. The reasons for this decline are not completely understood, but it is generally believed the main forces responsible are

competition from alien species (mostly European Starlings) and habitat destruction.

So far, the number of flickers on Galiano has remained strong. In fact, they are probably more numerous now than they were before the felling of the old-growth forest that covered most of the island until quite recently. During the last 12 Christmas counts when the island's top birders did a census of the birds present on Galiano, the number of flickers counted exceeded the numbers of all other woodpeckers combined, and last year the number of flickers counted tied the past record for the species (50).

Unfortunately, the number of European Starlings is also quite high. That's a worry because starlings compete aggressively with flickers for nest sites, and although smaller than flickers, they usually succeed in evicting flickers from their newly excavated nest holes whenever the two species come into conflict. Flickers, after being driven from a nest hole, will often excavate a second hole and breed successfully. Nonetheless, the probability of breeding successfully is reduced by this conflict, and at some point the increasing number of starlings must surely reduce the number of flickers and also reduce the number of members of species that depend on flickers for nest holes.

Originally from Europe, about 100 starlings were released in Central Park, in New York City, in the 1890's by a group of Shakespeare enthusiasts who wished to establish in North America every species of bird mentioned in his plays. Spreading rapidly across the continent, starlings first reached the West Coast by the 1950's. Today this bird is one of the most abundant species in North America with a population estimated at over 200 million. At what point the number of starlings will stabilize is anybody's guess, but fortunately, their

numbers seem to be declining in some parts of North America, especially in Canada.

Even if the number of starlings has peaked in the Gulf Islands, which is doubtful, the negative impact of increasing human population on all the native cavity nesters will be huge. It's not just that people have a habit of replacing trees with asphalt, grass, and croplands, which favors starlings and other open country species like Brewer's Blackbirds, but where trees are left in the landscape, they tend not to be the kind of trees that are critical for the survival of cavity nesters. Such critical trees are usually old, large, dead or dying, with rotting wood and with bark that is sloughing off. Take a walk in a wooded area and notice where the entrance holes to cavity nests are located. Even the strongest excavators require some weakening of wood tissue through decay before they can excavate the large spaces needed for nesting. Some of the weaker excavators, such as Chestnut-backed Chickadees, are capable of creating a nest hole only in wood that is very well rotted, and more often than not such birds find it necessary to reuse old holes made by stronger excavators.

Under natural conditions, trees remain important components of the ecosystem long after their death. If left undisturbed by humans, dead trees will often remain standing for about a third as long as they stood while alive. For a large fir or cedar that could mean a useful existence as prime wildlife habitat for hundreds of years. In urban and rural areas such trees are understandably considered a serious liability.

Forestry managers across the continent are increasingly becoming aware of the importance of managing woodlands for wildlife values as well as for timber. On Galiano at the end of McCoskrie Road, the Galiano Conservancy is managing a small demonstration forest near Cable Bay, and a

short trail through the parcel highlights the forestry practices that are beneficial for wildlife as well as for the overall health of a commercial forest (pick up an informative brochure at the trailhead).

In the more urbanized parts of the island, nestboxes can help provide habitat for some of the cavity nesters. Chickadees and House Wrens, for example, will readily rear their broods in boxes placed in appropriate habitat. Entrance holes that are 3.5 cm (1.25 inches) in diameter are large enough to permit the entrance of wrens or chickadees, but small enough to exclude starlings. Sadly, nestbox holes large enough for flickers are also large enough for starlings, and experiments have demonstrated that both starlings and flickers overwhelmingly prefer cavities that have been newly excavated by flickers. All problems do not have easy solutions.

Perhaps one of the most beneficial things that nature lovers living in semi-rural areas can do is think twice about removing standing dead wood. Some dead and dying trees are clearly a threat to people and structures. Some are insufferable blights on the landscape, but not all. Sometimes the dying top of an otherwise healthy tree is just what a flicker or some other woodpecker is looking for. I know that my own attitude about dead wood was radically transformed the day I found a Pileated Woodpecker busily eating carpenter ants from a stump in my yard that I was about to remove. That stump is still there, and on many occasions I have been amply rewarded for my small attitude adjustment by wildlife sightings that have thrilled me and my guests.

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Natural Mysteries

Last month's mystery was: What makes those little round holes that we see in clam shells on the beach? Well, it might be

the work of some wag with an electric drill who goes out at low tide on full moon nights. But the more likely culprit is the carnivorous Moon Snail (*Polinices lewisii*), which dines happily on clams, especially big Littleneck Clams, and other shelled intertidal creatures. The Moon Snail plows through the bottom sand and muck on an incoming tide, and when it finds a clam – lunch! – it wraps its foot around the shell and uses its rasp-like tongue, called a radula, to bore a hole in the shell. Then it sucks out the clam innards. Yum.

This month's Natural Mystery: What is sap and how does it get to the tops of even very tall trees?

Have an answer? Send your thoughts to galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com. Have a Natural Mystery of your own? Let us know, and we'll try to answer it.

THE GALIANO NATURALISTS are a group of curious explorers who enjoy observing, marveling, and sharing information about the natural world around us. Come join us. (galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com)