

## Sapsucking Woodpeckers Not Named “Sapsucker”

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Members of the bird family Picidae have common names that end with both “woodpecker” and “sapsucker.” From these monikers we might imply the former limit their activity to extraction of prey from wood, while the latter limit their intake to sap. Not true.

For years since the task of diagnosing animal damage to trees landed in my inbox at the Colorado State Forest Service, I have noticed odd patterns of sap wells on living trees that do not have the tidy “tic-tac-toe” appearance typical of our true sapsuckers (Red-naped, Williamson’s, and Yellow-bellied). At first I thought certain “sloppy” patterns of peck holes in the bark of live trees not infested with insects were attributable to other woodpeckers modifying the work of true sapsuckers while poaching a drink.

Mooching from, and modification of, wounds originally made by sapsuckers certainly occurs. This is well documented in the literature, including the prominent ecologist Paul Erlich and his students at Gothic near Crested Butte, Colorado, and in the Pacific Northwest (Nickell 1965, Erlich and Daily 1988, Daily et al. 1993). Using old school observation and motion detector cameras, researchers captured a wide assortment of animals playing out a real life version of the children’s story “Little Red Hen.” Hummingbirds, flies and wasps, butterflies, nuthatches, chipmunks, even bobcats were caught in the act of sap theft. The sapsuckers provided access to the food, and the

rest answered the chicken chef’s question of “who will help me eat the bread?” Significantly, the studies in the Rockies and elsewhere proposed drinking from sapsucker wells to be so important to migrating hummingbirds as to be a significant determinant in the timing of their



*Fig. 1. Female Downy Woodpecker drinking from sap wells it made in a live ponderosa pine, Riverbend Business Park, Fort Collins, CO, 12 February 2017. Photo by David Leatherman*



Fig. 2. The unordered network of holes created by this female Downy Woodpecker is apparent in this image. Riverbend Business Park, Fort Collins, CO, 12 February 2017. Photo by David Leatherman



Fig. 3. Sap wells made by Downy Woodpecker in live ponderosa pine in Fort Collins. Note the mostly random, widely spaced pattern of holes. The only alignment of wells is over certain small lengths horizontally. Photo by David Leatherman

north-south movements. That is to say, the hummingbirds move north or south *after* the north or south movements of sapsuckers in order to take advantage of sapsucker-prepared “fuel stations” along their route.

Apart from the mutualism that exists between sapsuckers and other fauna, this brief account simply is intended to document *initiation* of sap wells for the purpose of self-indulging by woodpeckers other than those we call sapsuckers in Colorado. I have seen both Downy Woodpecker and Hairy Woodpecker do this in our state, which has been reported for both species elsewhere (Short 1982). One other species common here, American Three-toed Woodpecker, engages in similar activity (Villard 1994).

On several occasions I have noted Downy Woodpeckers pecking live trees to get the resultant sap. Conifers serving as hosts for this activity have been ponderosa (*Pinus ponderosae*) and Scots pine (*P.*



Fig. 4. Sap wells made in live aspen by sapsucker species, probably Red-naped. Note the holes are ordered both horizontally and vertically. Photo by David Leatherman

same individual female was noted in this 20-foot tall tree drinking sap over a few-month period in late winter/early spring 2017 from wells presumably she made. Unlike what occurs with sapsuckers utilizing a particular tree over a period of weeks or months, flow-sustaining enlargement of the initial Downy-made trunk wells was not significant. The only indication any modifications had been done at all was the different color (reddish brown) of newly worked bark versus that of bark around the original holes (gray-brown). Another way in which the injury of the Downy differed from typical sapsucker pecking was the more random, unordered, rather widely spaced pattern of holes. Also, the size of the holes and subsequent working around their edges indicated the bird that made them used a smaller chisel (aka, beak) than a sapsucker (see Figs. 1, 2, and 3 in comparison to Fig. 4).

I have seen Hairy Woodpeckers visiting sap wells made by Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers at Grandview Cemetery in Fort Collins on several occasions. But the only time I have witnessed them initiating holes for the purpose of drinking sap involved a lodgepole pine (*P. contorta*) in Coal Creek Canyon. Of course, my real reason for being at this site

*sylvestris*). Along the Poudre River in Fort Collins, Siberian elm (*Ulmus pumila*) has been used.

Early in the history of our country, whether Downy Woodpeckers do this and whether it was damaging to the tree was hotly debated. Conclusions have been that it is not for the purpose of eating cambium (i.e., for sap only), that the holes are shallow and seldom revisited, and that it is not serious to the health of tree. I would disagree about the wells not being revisited, but generally agree with the rest. Perhaps the lack of interest in cambium is why there does not seem to be a lot of hole enlargement when Downy Woodpeckers engage in live tree sap sucking.

The situation where I most studied this occurred in Fort Collins on the Poudre River's west side just north of Prospect Street. The tree was a ponderosa pine installed as landscaping at the Riverbend Business Park. The

was to view the special Magnificent Hummingbird female visiting Adam Jack's feeder in early November 2014.

A review of Cornell University's extensive "Birds of North America" database indicates it is likely that most, if not all, members of the woodpecker genus *Picoides* peck on live trees to obtain sap. In addition to the three Colorado species mentioned, it is also known for Black-backed Woodpecker, White-headed Woodpecker, and Nuttall's Woodpecker (Miller and Bock 1972, Raphael and White 1984, Cramp 1985, Villard 1994). Other members of this genus for which it has *not* been recorded are Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, and Arizona Woodpecker.

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