

Northern Flicker ID: A Caution about Intergrades, Part I

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In Colorado, identifying Northern Flickers to species (*Colaptes auratus*) is simple, what with the bright coloration on the underside of wings and tail. Determining the sex of such is also quite easy, given at least some reasonable view of the face: males have distinct red or black malar stripes contrasting with the rest of the face. Identification beyond species, however, gets quite tricky.

Colorado hosts both Yellow-shafted Flickers (*C. a. luteus*; part of the *auratus* group of subspecies) and Red-shafted Flickers (*C. a. col-laris*; part of the *cafer* group of subspecies) (Pyle 1997). The identification to subspecies group (Yellow-shafted or Red-shafted) would be very easy were it not for the very large number of intergrades (essentially hybrids between the two groups; more on that below) that occur in the state, particularly on the plains. The appearance of these intergrades run the gamut of the possible mix of characters from very Yellow-shafted-like to very Red-shafted-like. Thus, particularly in eastern Colorado, any individual flicker should not be identified to subspecies group without the observer seeing it, and seeing it well. Because the color of the inner webs on flight feathers is so unreliable

as an absolute indicator of subspecies group in Northern Flickers, particularly in eastern Colorado, I have summarized some other characters that can assist in correct assignment of individual flickers to subspecies group below (refer to Figures 1 and 2).

Head coloration

Yellow-shafted – mostly brown, with gray from mid-crown down nape to back; red chevron-shaped nape patch; males have a black malar stripe



Fig. 1. Female Yellow-shafted Flicker showing mostly brown head, brown throat, red patch on gray nape, and yellow inner webs to the flight feathers. Male Yellow-shafteds sport a distinct black malar stripe. Port Crescent State Park, Huron County, Michigan, 13 April 2014. Photograph by Tony Leukering

Red-shafted – lower half (below eyes) all or mostly gray, upper half variable, usually gray, often brown; those with gray on the upper half of the head have brown in the supraloral area extending to above and behind the eye; no nape patch; males have a red malar stripe, females a brown malar stripe, often indistinct

Throat coloration

Yellow-shafted – brown continuing from face to breast shield

Red-shafted – gray continuing from face to breast shield

Inner webs of flight feathers on wings and tail

Yellow-shafted – yellow

Red-shafted – salmon through reddish-orange to orangish-red

Intergrades

Because the color of the undersides of the wings and tail are unreliable in identifying individual Northern Flickers to subspecies group, correct identification also demands a good view of the head and neck, as most of the other differentiating characters lie there. Hybrids between a “pure” Red-shafted Flicker and a “pure” Yellow-shafted Flicker seem to result in birds with quite intermediate characters, with an obvious mismatch between wing/tail coloration and other characters. However, mating of an intergrade with either of the parental types (Yellow-shafted or Red-shafted) can result in individuals that are not so easily distinguished from pure parental types. Because these backcrosses can look mostly like one of the parental types, great care is required in identifying any apparently pure-looking bird to subspecies group.

In my experience, the most frequent Yellow-shafted character present in Red-shafted-like intergrades is the red nape patch of Yellow-shafted. I have seen more than a few birds that I was about ready to identify as Red-shafted Flickers when I noticed a bit of red in the nape. Also in my experience, those intergrades that look most-



Fig. 2. Male Red-shafted Flicker showing gray throat and, at least, gray lower half of face, and no red on brown nape. Many Red-shafteds have most of the head gray. Female Red-shafteds show a more-or-less distinct brown malar stripe. Monterey County, California, 3 November 2017. Photograph by Carole Rose



Fig. 7. This flicker could easily be passed off as a Red-shafted, with the orange inner webs to the flight feathers, the mostly gray head, and the red malar stripe. However, closer scrutiny shows two anomalous features. The exact color of orange on the flight feathers is the first alarm that might ring in one's head, as it is just too far along the gradient toward yellow to allow comfort in an identification as Red-shafted. The addition of the suggestion of some red in the gray nape in precisely the location of Yellow-shafted's red nape patch provides the death knell to that Red-shafted identification. Neenoshe Reservoir, Kiowa County, Colorado, 15 October 2017. Photograph by Steve Mlodinow

Yellow-shafted-like are betrayed by red in the malar stripe, either an entirely red malar stripe or a stripe with a mixture of red and black. In Figures 3–6 on the back cover, I present an array of intergrades to illustrate at least some of the range of variation in appearance of such birds. Figure 7 presents one of those truly tricky individual flickers to assess.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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LITERATURE CITED

Pyle, P. 1997. Identification Guide to North American Birds, part I. Slate Creek Press, Bolinas, CA.

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Fig. 3 (back cover). This flicker probably represents a parental pairing of Red-shafted and Yellow-shafted as it is solidly intermediate in appearance, with a mixture of Red-shafted features—head coloration, red malar stripe—and Yellow-shafted features—red nape patch, yellow inner webs to flight feathers. Were this bird to produce young with either parental type, their progeny would not be so obviously intermediate in appearance. Probably. Fort Lupton, Weld County, Colorado, 1 May 2006. Photograph by Tony Leukering

Fig. 4 (back cover). Were this flicker facing the camera, we would have no clue as to this bird's mixed parentage, as head, malar, and flight-feather colors all match for an identification as Red-shafted. However, since it nicely turned its head to reveal red on the nape, the correct identity as an intergrade is straightforward, even on Colorado's West Slope! Steamboat Springs, Routt County, Colorado, 23 November 2015. Photograph by David and Tresa Moulton

Fig. 5 (back cover). Were this bird seen only flying away, one might consider this West Slope flicker to be an out-of-range Yellow-shafted. However, this straightforward male intergrade, with its mismatch of flight-feather color and head coloration, points out the inefficacy of using only flight-feather coloration to differentiate flicker subspecies groups. Durango, La Plata County, Colorado, 17 December 2017. Photograph by Catherine Ortega

Fig. 6 (back cover). Even farther astray was this female flicker sporting Red-shafted head coloration, but yellow flight feathers. Reno, Washoe County, Nevada, 3 January 2016. Photograph by Paul Hurtado



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

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