

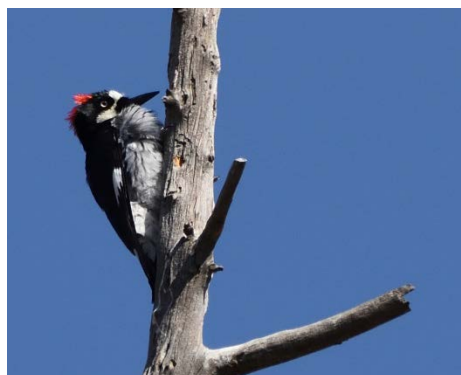


Acorn Woodpecker

Melanerpes formicivorus

February 2019

Field Notes



NPS/Susie King

Acorn woodpecker (*Melanerpes formicivorus*).

General Description

Raucous and colorful, *Melanerpes formicivorus* is a medium-sized woodpecker with a knack for turning trees into kitchen pantries. Topped by a bright red crown, the acorn woodpecker's distinct "clown-face" is black and white, with white eyes. Its glossy black back contrasts with a white rump and wing patches seen in flight. Its white to yellowish throat ends at a black collar, which fades to dark streaking and then a white belly. Its flight is undulating.

Habitat and Distribution

The acorn woodpecker's reliance on acorns controls its habitat. Common in pine-oak woodlands, it also breeds in riparian, Douglas-fir, redwood, and tropical hardwood forests where oaks, such as the tanoak of coastal Oregon and California, are available.

In the US, acorn woodpeckers occur in Oregon, California, and the Southwest, but the species' entire range goes down to northern South America. The northernmost of 7 subspecies, *M. f. bairdi*, is the Oregon and California variety.

Most acorn woodpecker populations are year-round residents, leaving their core territory only when food is scarce.

Behavior and Feeding

Acorn woodpeckers are highly social, which is obvious if you happen upon the noisy chatter of a social group. The sing-songy "waka-waka-waka" is a common greeting call—sometimes also used antagonistically.

Acorn woodpeckers eat a variety of insects, including flying ants, wasps, and beetles, which are snagged in flight from a treetop perch, as flycatchers do. During the winter, when insects are rare, acorn woodpeckers turn to their backup food supply: acorns, which actually comprise half their diet and are vital to the species' survival. A poor or failed acorn crop can force the social group to move in search of food and hamper reproduction. In the fall, acorns are collected and stored in individually drilled holes in 1 or 2 "granary" trees that anchor a social group's territory. The holes are drilled into dead limbs or thick bark, avoiding live tree tissue. Each year, the woodpeckers drill a few new holes into which the nuts are snugly pressed—so snugly, in fact, that squirrels and other aspiring thieves cannot pry them out. One storage tree had 50,000 storage holes! Undeterred by humans, they may also transform utility poles, fence posts, or even the side of your house into a granary.

Acorn woodpeckers also eat sap in early spring if their acorn supply is gone. To get to the sap, they drill small holes in bark that are larger, farther apart, and less linearly spaced than those made by sapsucker woodpeckers. Other foods include fruit, oat catkins, flower nectar, and less commonly, grass seeds, lizards, and bird eggs (rejected from their own nests!).

Reproduction

Acorn woodpeckers are cooperative breeders, sharing in the care of young. Typically, a core breeder group of 1–7

males mate with 1–3 females, assisted by up to 10 male and female nonbreeding helpers. Multiple males may mate with the same female and vice versa, known as opportunistic polygyny. Cobreeding females lay eggs in the same nest. Competition to pass on one's own genes can get tough, though, with each breeding female regularly removing other eggs from the joint nest (to be eaten by the group) until she lays her first egg. An average of five white eggs are laid per clutch, hatching in 11 days into nestlings that then fledge in 30–32 days. The nonbreeding adults help incubate, brood, and feed the young.



Fence post granary in oak woodland. S. Daw

Conservation

Acorn woodpeckers appear stable, but their need for diverse oak woodlands and granary snags conflicts with the decline in some areas of these habitat features.

Where to See

Acorn woodpeckers breed in Redwood NSP, Whiskeytown NRA, and Oregon Caves NMP, and are occasional vagrants at Lassen Volcanic NP.

More Information

<https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/acorn-woodpecker>

<https://blog.nature.org/science/2017/04/24/acorn-woodpecker-the-fascinating-life-of-the-master-hoarder/>