



## Black-Backed Woodpecker December 2017

### *Picoides arcticus*

#### Field Notes



Male black-backed woodpecker (*Picoides arcticus*). NPS/Mike Laycock.

#### General Description

An alarming increase in high severity fires is challenging firefighters and land managers across the western United States. One rarely seen forest bird, however, depends on these disturbances for survival.

*Picoides arcticus* is a medium sized woodpecker of boreal and northern montane forests, approximately 23 cm (9 in) long from tip of bill to tip of the tail. Its solid black cape contrasts with white underparts and heavy black and white barring on its sides and flanks. Its black back provides perfect camouflage against the bark of burned trees, where it spends most of its time foraging. A distinct white stripe stretches from bill to nape, below the eye. Males are distinguished from females by the yellow patch on their heads.

Like its close cousin, the American three-toed woodpecker, the black-backed woodpecker has only three toes. Most woodpeckers have two toes forward and two toes backward (zygodactyly) to help with climbing tree trunks. The black-backed woodpecker's toes are arranged with two forward and one backward.

#### Habitat

Black-backed woodpeckers range throughout most of Canada in the pine, spruce, and larch boreal forest, with some populations dipping down into the northern United States. A southern Oregon and Sierra Nevada population may be genetically distinct from their more northern neighbors.

Known as burnt-forest specialists, black-backed woodpeckers rely heavily on newly burned patches of forest that attract insects. Studies show dramatic increases in reproduction for populations just after moving into a newly burned area. Sudden population increases, or irruptions, outside their normal range may occur where this prime habitat becomes available.

As primary cavity nesters, black-backed woodpeckers do the excavation work for secondary cavity nesters dependent on others to create nesting holes.

#### Behavior and Feeding

Working its way slowly up a tree trunk, a black-backed woodpecker digs into dying or recently dead trees with powerful blows. Its skull is highly specialized to deliver and tolerate forceful excavation of wood. When excavating, it closes its eyes.

Beetles and their plump larvae are choice prey. In particular, they feed on insects that move into recently burned forests in the early stages of decay, like wood-boring and mountain pine beetles.

Both males and females drum throughout the year, though it increases during the breeding season to attract a mate and establish territory. Vocalizations include what is described as "a rattle-like snarl" in defense of the nesting territory. This might be accompanied by a hunched-head swinging display. The male raises the bright

yellow crest on his head to attract mates or fend off competitors.

#### Life Cycle and Reproduction

In April and May, males and females form a monogamous pair and begin excavating a nest. The nest hole can be in live, decaying, or dead trees, but is usually surrounded by a high density of dead trees. Typically, three to four white, ovate eggs are laid and incubated by both male and female. Nestlings hatch 12 to 14 days later, naked and completely dependent on the adults (altricial). Both adults also care for the young until they fledge at 24 to 25 days old.

#### Conservation

Black-backed woodpeckers are a species of concern in Washington, California, and Oregon. Because these birds are so dependent on the insects drawn to newly burned forest, forest management that changes natural fire cycles or the availability of forest insects and pathogens can be detrimental. Some conservation measures proposed include allowing select wildfires to burn and waiting several years after a fire to remove the dead trees (postfire salvage logging).

#### Where to See

In the Klamath Network, black-backed woodpeckers uncommonly occur in Crater Lake NP, Lassen Volcanic NP, and Lava Beds NM.

#### More Information

<https://birdsna.org/Species-Account/bna/species/bkbwoo/introduction/>

Odion, D.C., and C.T. Hanson. 2013. [Projecting Impacts of fire Management on a Biodiversity Indicator in the Sierra Nevada and Cascades, USA: The Black-Backed Woodpecker](#)