

School-to-Nature



Male Downy Woodpecker



Female Downy Woodpecker

Downy Woodpecker

Genus: Dryobates Species: Pubescens

The Downy Woodpecker is found all over the U.S. and is plentiful on Conservancy lands, as well as visiting backyard feeders. It is one of the smallest of the native North American woodpeckers, only about 5.5-7 inches long. Downies can be fun to watch, and they are quite bold among other birds.

They are completely black and white, except that the male (only) has a red spot at the back of its head, as you can see in the photo above. Downies look very much like a slightly larger woodpecker, the Hairy Woodpecker (seen at the right); and the coloration is very similar. To tell them apart, look for size differences, beak shape, and the size of the feet. "Hairies" are quite a bit larger, with larger feet and claws; and they also have a much longer, thicker beak. A Downy has a beak that is almost delicate compared to that of a Hairy. Compare both photos.



Hairy Woodpecker

Downy Woodpeckers are resident birds; they do not migrate from the woods



Downy nest inside a tree

where they live. The male and female Downies are true partners in nest building and in raising young. They seek out a dead branch that is softened from fungus growth, and they work to carve out a hole into the wood that is 6-12" deep. The photo to the left shows a cutaway of a nest model. The carving process takes 1-3 weeks. The 3-8 eggs are laid on wood chips, incubating for 2 weeks. The young fledge in 3 weeks, and are fed by the parents another 3 weeks; then the young birds can hunt on their own for insects and seeds.

The Downies' diet is 75% insects such as ants, caterpillars and beetle larvae from wood and inside tree bark. 25% of their diet is plant based. They seek out suet, black oil sunflower seeds, millet, and peanuts, at outdoor feeders. They also eat acorns and berries, and drill holes into tree bark to drink tree sap. Downies sometimes sneak drinks from Hummingbird and Oriole feeders! Downy Woodpeckers can be the prey of several species of hawks.

/ DL

Caledonia Conservancy | P.O. Box 044714 | Racine, WI | 53404
262-498-4993 | www.CaledoniaConservancy.org