



Hairy Woodpecker

It's easy to attract one of the most widespread birds in North America to your yard.

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The air was cool and wet in the high-elevation Costa Rican forest. Beneath the overcast sky and low canopy of dense surrounding woods, it was nearly dark. From somewhere in those depths, I could hear a bird calling, strangely familiar in that otherworldly tropical jungle.

For some time, I clambered around, binoculars in hand, trying to glimpse the bird. Eventually, through a narrow passage between the dripping, twisted branches, I saw it and immediately understood why the call seemed so familiar. It was a hairy woodpecker, smaller than I'm used to and oddly sooty colored, but unmistakable. I was shocked—this was the same species that regularly visits my suet feeder back home in Alaska.

I pulled out my tattered guide to the birds of Costa Rica. Sure enough, the information indicated this nonmigratory species had an enormous range, reaching from the farthest extents of the boreal forest in Alaska and Canada to the mountains of western Panama.

Previously, I had encountered this species in the high pine forests of the Cordillera Central in Mexico. I had also seen them in old-growth spruce forests of the Pacific Northwest, and found them foraging in the hardwoods of the eastern United States. I hadn't realized just how far their range extended.

Subtle Differences

Due in large part to the hairy woodpecker's extensive range, the species is highly variable. In the far southern parts of its distribution, in southern Central America, it is small and gray colored. In Alaska, hairies have an immaculate white breast and are huge, weighing a third or more than populations in the lower 48 states and twice as much as those in Central America.

This extreme variability from one region to the next, from one population to another, can make identifying hairy woodpeckers a challenge. Downy woodpeckers, the hairy's smaller cousin, are very similar in appearance and occur in many of the same habitats.

Luckily, there are a few characteristics that make distinguishing these two species a bit easier. First is their size: Hairies are substantially larger. However, assessing size is not always straightforward, and it is often necessary to look at other characteristics.

So, take a look at the bill. Hairy woodpeckers have a bill that is as long or longer than the length of their head, while a downy woodpecker's bill is considerably smaller. It's rarely greater than the distance from the front of the head to the back of the eye. (In the photo at right, the hairy is at the bottom.)

Though the plumages of the two species are nearly identical (both have black backs

speckled with white, and the males bear red on the backs of their heads), there is one other difference worth noting. Downy woodpeckers always have black bars in the white outer tail feathers, while this is generally lacking in hairy woodpeckers.

As I mentioned earlier, hairies are diverse, and this is true of behavior as well as appearance. A species as widely distributed as this one needs to adapt to many different habitats and climates. Like other woodpeckers, they feed primarily by climbing up and down trunks of trees searching for insects.

Hairies regularly use a method called "percussion" in which they tap lightly on the

CAN I GET SOME OF THAT? Suet will attract both hairy and downy woodpeckers (below) to your backyard. To tell the difference between the two, look at the overall size of the bird and its bill. Downies are smaller and have a shorter bill.



side of the tree as they climb up and around. They are not collecting food, but searching, listening for the telltale hollow sound of a grub or insect embedded inside. After encountering a likely spot, they will spend all the time necessary pecking, prying and excavating the wood to extract the morsel.

Crafty Techniques

Though this foraging strategy is typical, it is not the only one used. Hairies have been observed catching insects in flight, eating ants off the ground, picking bugs out from beneath scales of bark, delicately prying open sunflower seeds on bird feeders, and thieving sap from the tree carvings of yellow-bellied and red-breasted sapsuckers.

In spring, I find hairy woodpeckers most often when I hear their rattling call and loud drumming. Drumming displays are used to establish territories, much like a singing songbird, and are an indicator that a nest cavity, excavated from a dead tree, is somewhere in the vicinity.

Hairies establish monogamous pairs and may remain bonded to the same individual throughout their lives. Once a pair establishes a territory, they won't wander very far and can often be found, season after season, year after year, inhabiting the same patch of woods.

Recoveries of banded birds suggest that hairy woodpeckers rarely wander more than 30 miles from their home territory. In fact, a pair of hairies lives in the forest surrounding my home near Fairbanks. I can find them just about any day, whether it's a cold January day or a hot one in July.

From Sea to Shining Sea

As I sit here, looking out at the snow and think back on that day I discovered the hairy woodpecker in Costa Rica, I can picture the tropical forest strewn with bromeliads and moss, the trees crooked from the wind. When I saw the hairy, the place no longer seemed so foreign. I knew then, that in that strange jungle lived a bird that also resided around my home 5,000 miles to the north.

This knowledge made me feel far more connected than I had before to the greater world. Even years later, I can still feel that connection. Now, each time I hear the call of a hairy woodpecker as I stroll through a snowy Alaskan forest, I think of another in Central America, drumming back.

At a Glance

■ **Size:** Bird is 9-1/4 inches long and has a 1.5-inch wingspan.

■ **ID Tips:** The hairy has a black and white checked back. It's almost identical to the downy, but is noticeable larger. The hairy has a longer, heavier bill and an inconspicuous tuft. The females look similar to males, but they lack the red mark on the back of the head.

■ **Voice:** A strong "peck" or "peech," sharper than the downy.

■ **Nesting:** Pairs work together to excavate the cavity. The females usually lay four white eggs. Young leave the nest after roughly a month.

■ **Diet:** Insects, larvae of wood borers, fruit and nuts.

■ **Fun Facts:** This bird can look quite different in its varied regions. Across its huge range, there are over 17 subspecies.

■ **Backyard Favorites:** Visits feeding stations for suet, sunflower seeds, meat scraps and peanut butter.



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