

DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN THREE-TOED AND BLACK-BACKED WOODPECKERS

by Nicholas Komar

The following comments on these two species of northern woodpecker (generically referred to as "three-toed") are based on observations made during the 1985 breeding season (May 25-July 5) in the spruce-fir habitat along Realty Road in Aroostook County, Maine.

Both woodpecker species are unafraid of man, as are many boreal species. Sometimes, while walking through the forest, I would hear the distinctive soft tapping of a "three-toed" and would look up to discover a Black-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides arcticus*) going about its business only a few feet away. More often than not, however, it would fly out of sight as soon as I noticed it. Rarely was I lucky enough to come across the less conspicuous Three-toed Woodpecker (*P. tridactylus*). However, the few experiences I did have with the latter species have enabled me to make some clear distinctions between the two. Although both are tolerant of an observer's presence, the Black-backed Woodpecker seemed more so and is in every respect a much more conspicuous bird than the slightly smaller and shyer Three-toed Woodpecker.

Field Marks. The Black-backed Woodpecker is a very beautiful bird, much more striking than its counterpart. The completely black back is actually shiny -- appearing glossy black. The back of the Three-toed is much less striking than the Black-backed's, of a very dark brown or black color, but not shiny. The major contribution to the duller aspect of the back is the presence of weak white barring (barely visible on some individuals) in the eastern subspecies of the Three-toed Woodpecker (*P. t. bacatus*). This fact confused me when I located my first Three-toed. Expecting to differentiate the two species by the clear white ladderback shown in the field guides, I was surprised when close scrutiny of this individual Three-toed revealed only faint barring on the back!

The heads of the two species can be contrasted in the same way. The Black-backed has a striking black-and-white head with a well-defined white face pattern. The bright yellow cap is also well-delineated. On the other hand, the head of the Three-toed is less striking. The black-and-white head pattern is characterized by poorly defined borders. The weak eyeline stretches faintly back over the black neck and connects with the faint barring on the upper back. This gives the appearance of the ladder-back creeping up onto the nape. Even the male's yellow cap always appears ruffled, whereas that of the Black-backed is usually immaculate. Overall, the color pattern of the Three-toed's head seems rather disorganized, whereas the Black-backed has quite a handsomely marked head.

Calls. The call of both species is "kik," although that of the Black-backed is slightly more explosive than that of the Three-toed. The Black-backed has another very distinctive call which sounds like a kingfisher rattle. It often makes this call in flight, and also after alighting near its nest with food, sometimes spreading its wings as it calls.

The Three-toed Woodpecker gives a similar call just before feeding young or when it is excited (as when intruders are near the nest). The call can be described as five rapid "kiks," each one getting shorter and lower-pitched but without culminating in a rattle like the Black-backed's call.

The two woodpeckers have nearly identical drumrolls. The drumroll gets noticeably faster at the end, distinguishing it from the rolls of the Hairy, Downy, or Flicker.

The most common noise you will hear from the "three-toeds" is their distinctive pecking, which sounds like someone tapping out the Morse Code! They make this noise while trying to remove rectangular flaps of bark to get at the morsels of food underneath.

Nesting. Another noise to be alert for is that of the young in the nest. Nestlings of both species make a continuous, high-pitched ticking noise, which gets louder when the parents call, with about 240 ticks per minute. Use this noise as a guide for locating the nest from as far as a hundred feet away. The nests of both species are marked by a small round hole, located about ten to twenty feet up the trunk of a dead softwood tree that is usually well-decorated with the lichen *Usnea* ("old-man's beard"), hanging from the dead limbs. Young of both species were still in the nest as of the first week of July (a good time to go looking).

Birders who decide to look for these woodpeckers along Realty Road will thoroughly enjoy the striking beauty and coquettish behavior of the Black-backed Woodpecker. The Three-toed Woodpecker will be much more of a challenge, but equally rewarding. With luck and careful observation, you won't have to come home with only stories of the probable "three-toed" that got away.

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