

## ABOUT THE COVER: RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER

The noisy, boisterous Red-bellied Woodpecker (*Melanerpes carolinus*) has enjoyed a northward expansion in its range in recent years, and has dramatically increased its numbers in Massachusetts. This medium-sized woodpecker is easily identified by its scarlet nape (in the male, scarlet nape and crown) combined with its black-barred back. The male has a reddish tinge to its belly, but this is not a reliable field mark — the bird is poorly named. Immature birds resemble adults except that they usually lack the red nape. In flight, the combination of white wing spots at the base of the primaries and a white rump is distinctive in our region.

Taxonomically, the Red-bellied Woodpecker is generally considered monotypic (four subspecies have been described, but individual variation masks the perceived differences, rendering these subspecific distinctions problematic). The Red-bellied Woodpecker is part of a superspecies that includes the Gila and Golden-fronted woodpeckers of North America, Hoffman's Woodpecker in Central America, and the Great Red-Bellied Woodpecker of the West Indies. These five species are recently evolved from a common ancestor, furnishing an excellent illustration of evolution in action.

Red-bellied Woodpeckers are found throughout most of the eastern United States, from Minnesota, southern Ontario, and Massachusetts south through Texas and Florida. They are found in deciduous, riparian, or mixed woodlands, and in swamps, parks, orchards, and towns. The species is not migratory in the usual sense, but appears to undergo a postbreeding dispersal, often to the north. Although the Red-bellied Woodpecker is largely resident in most of its range, many individuals become quasi-nomadic in winter as they search for food supplies. Until the 1950s, Red-bellied Woodpeckers in Massachusetts were considered rare vagrants from the south. The first confirmed breeding in Massachusetts was in 1977; since then, they have increased steadily in numbers, with scores of pairs now nesting on Martha's Vineyard alone. They have been recorded nesting as far west as the Connecticut River Valley. Red-bellied Woodpeckers are especially evident in fall and early winter, when they often appear at bird feeders.

Red-bellied Woodpeckers are monogamous and in the south may produce up to three broods per year. The calls of these noisy birds have been variously transcribed as *Churr*, *Chee-wuk*, *Cherr-cherr*, *Chip-chup*, *Wuch-aa*, *Cha-aa-ah*, and a seemingly endless string of other unpronounceable combinations. They drum on dead stumps or telephone poles at nearly 20 beats per second, a behavior that serves as territorial advertisement and probably for mate attraction, as well. Red-bellies engage in a variety of displays including crest raising, wing and tail spreading, head swinging, bowing, and several exaggerated flight displays. There is often mutual tapping by pairs near the nest

site. Pairs split up after raising their young and establish independent territories. Red-bellied Woodpeckers may even exhibit interspecific territoriality, attempting to exclude Red-headed Woodpeckers from their territories.

The nest is typically a cavity in a deciduous snag, often a dead limb on a live tree. The male does the early excavation, and the cavity may take more than a week to complete. The four or five white eggs are incubated by both parents, with the male taking the night shift. Incubation lasts up to two weeks, with fledging occurring after an additional three to four weeks. The female does more of the brooding and guarding than the male. The young birds are dependent on their parents for an additional six to ten weeks. Both parents feed the young a combination of insects and vegetable food.

Red-bellied Woodpeckers are foraging generalists. They are omnivorous, their diet shifting in response to seasonal variation in food resources. They glean and probe tree trunks, usually hitching up the trunk, and glean foliage, but may forage on the ground as well, taking ants, spiders, crickets, and small amphibians and reptiles. They sometimes sally forth and hawk insects on the wing. They have even been observed preying on nestling House Wrens, American Redstarts, White-breasted Nuthatches, and Carolina Chickadees, and taking House Sparrow eggs. They like fruit and nuts, and in the fall they may cache food such as acorns or hickory nuts in bark crevices. There is some evidence that males forage more on tree trunks during the winter than do females. In Florida their predilection for oranges and orange trees has earned them the local name "orange borer" and "orange sapsucker." They have been observed drinking from holes left by real sapsuckers. Plant material may make up more than eighty percent of their winter diet. At winter feeders, they will take suet, bread, and sunflower seeds.

Red-bellied Woodpeckers have adjusted well to suburban living, as the northward expansion of their range attests. Almost certainly, the availability of food at bird feeders in winter has played a role in the northward range expansion of this species. The suburban setting has its downside, however, since this species must compete for nest cavities with aggressive European Starlings. But the prognosis for this species is good — keep those feeders full!

--William E. Davis