

# Kenn Kaufman THE PRACTICED EYE

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## Identifying the Hairy Woodpecker

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BIRDERS SELDOM WANT TO TALK about the field identification of very common birds. This would be especially true for such widespread and familiar birds as the Hairy Woodpecker (*Picoides villosus*) and Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*). The implication seems to be that everyone should already know these species. But these two woodpeckers are astonishingly similar in plumage, and they sometimes give pause to even experienced observers. This

“Practiced Eye” compares the two, and looks at the variation in Hairy Woodpeckers that can compound the problem.

The Hairy is the bigger species, of course, but size alone has little value for identification unless the two are seen side by side. More helpful is the difference in bill proportions. The Downy’s bill is truly tiny for a woodpecker, barely extending beyond the tufts of feathers at its base. The typical Hairy has a much longer, more chisel-like bill (see Figure 1). But it’s important to note that in the latter species, males have larger bills than females. If your mental image of “typical” in Hairies is based on males, females may not be so obvious. The occasional small-billed female Hairy may take a second or third look to identify.

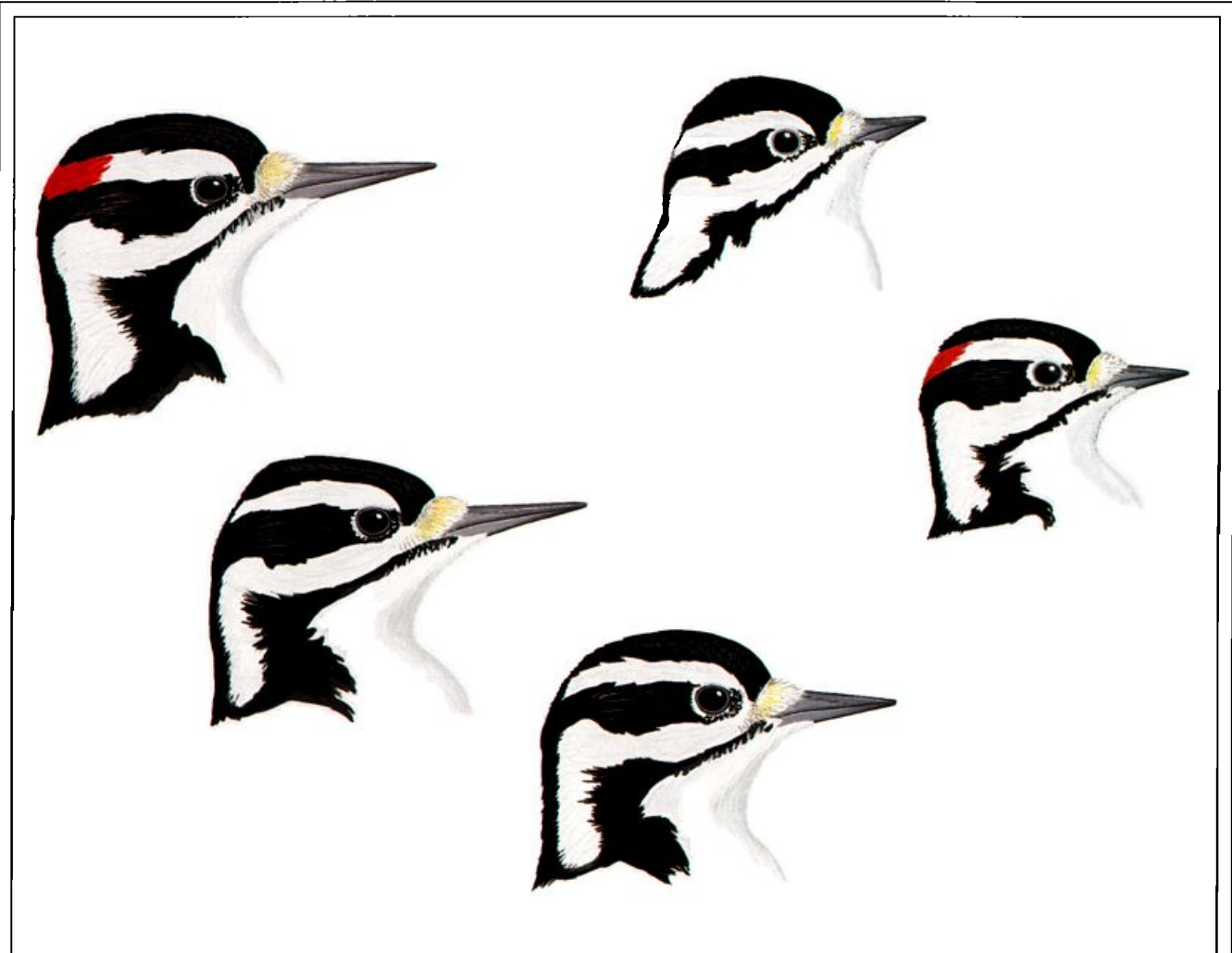
In trying to make general comparisons between Hairy and Downy woodpeckers, we encounter an obstacle: Both species show a lot of geographic variation. About seven distinct subspecies of Downies are rec-

ognized. Hairies are even more variable: About a dozen races are found in North America, with a couple more in the Bahamas and another five or so in Mexico and Central America. These subspecies were described originally on the basis of differences visible in the hand, but many of the differences are obvious in the field as well.

Although bird guides give one precise size measurement for each species, these birds actually show a lot of regional variation. (This is a worrisome thought, since size is also a major field mark for separating them). Fortunately, the two vary in tandem. The largest forms of both species are found at the northern limits of their range, across Canada and Alaska, and the birds get generally smaller farther south. In both species, the largest birds are those with the largest bills, so the appearance of bill size (relative to the size of the bird) does not change very much from place to place. But some Downy Woodpeckers from the Northwest Territories are about as large as some Hairy Woodpeckers from Guatemala, implying that size alone is a shaky field mark for observers on unfamiliar territory.

Another aspect in which the birds vary together is wing pattern. Hairies and Downies across the far north and in the eastern states and provinces (the ones that are usually illustrated) have prominent white spots on the coverts, especially the lesser and median coverts, which seem to show more white than black; they also have numerous white spots on the flight feathers. In the west, however, from the Rockies to the Pacific Coast, the white spots on the coverts largely disappear. Some Hairies in the Rocky Mountains have wings almost completely black, with only a few small white spots in the primaries and secondaries.

Color of the underparts also varies. White is the usual color, but in the Pacific Northwest both woodpeckers



**Figure 1.** Portraits of Hairy and Downy woodpeckers, mainly to compare bill shapes. Top left: typical adult male Hairy Woodpecker. Center left: typical adult female Hairy Woodpecker. Although the species varies in body size and bill size in different parts of its range, females average shorter-billed than males everywhere. Bottom: an atypically short-billed adult female Hairy Woodpecker. Top right: adult female Downy Woodpecker. Center right: adult male Downy Woodpecker. In this species, the sex difference in bill size is slight and inconsistent, not noticeable in the field. In comparing the two species, their different facial “expressions” seem to be caused mainly by the smaller bill and rounder head of the Downy, and actual differences in markings are hard to find. In some regions of North America I get the impression that the white spot on the side of the nape is more conspicuous on the Downy, more invaded by black on the Hairy, but I wouldn’t want to suggest that this holds up everywhere.

have the white of the underparts, facial stripes, and back replaced by a pale smoky brown.

Beyond these variations, in which Hairy and Downy woodpeckers parallel each other, there are some slight changes in tail pattern. The white outer tail feathers are usually unmarked in the Hairy Woodpecker, and usually marked with a few black bars in the Downy Woodpecker. However, Downies in some northern and western regions may have the black barring reduced, occasionally to the point where these feathers appear unmarked. And some Hairies have a few black spots or bars on the outer tail feathers. Such birds may crop up in various populations, but

they are prevalent in a few areas (see next paragraph). So the presence or absence of tail spots is not a totally re-

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liable field mark everywhere.

The Hairy Woodpecker offers further surprises in maritime regions of Canada, both east and west. Hairies found in Newfoundland often have “extra” dark markings on the flanks and back. Even more distinctive are

the birds in the Queen Charlotte Islands, off the coast of British Columbia. This isolated island group (which can also boast a very distinctive population of Northern Saw-whet Owl) holds a race of Hairy Woodpecker, *P. v. picoideus*, that looks almost different enough to be a different species. I have not seen these woodpeckers in life (though the Queen Charlottes are getting higher on my list of future destinations), but looking at a series of specimens at the American Museum of Natural History, I was impressed with their striking appearance, and with their variability. Most were washed with pale brown on the breast. Most had some dark bars on the flanks, streaks or spots on the sides of

the chest, and black spots or bars within the white on the back. Many had black bars on the white outer tail feathers—and on some (mainly juveniles?) these tail bars were more extensive than on the most heavily marked Downy Woodpecker.

When bird species are very similar in appearance, voice often provides a major clue for separating them. So it is with Downy and Hairy woodpeckers. Each species has two common calls that could be described as a “pick” note and a “rattle,” but the quality of these vocalizations is different. The Downy really does say *pick*, with a flat or chirping sound. The Hairy’s note is a sharp, ringing *peek!* We could say that the Downy sounds conversational, while the Hairy sounds urgent.

There is even more difference in their rattle calls. The Downy gives a short series of notes with about the

same quality as the “pick” call, starting at the same pitch as that call and then descending. The Hairy’s rattle

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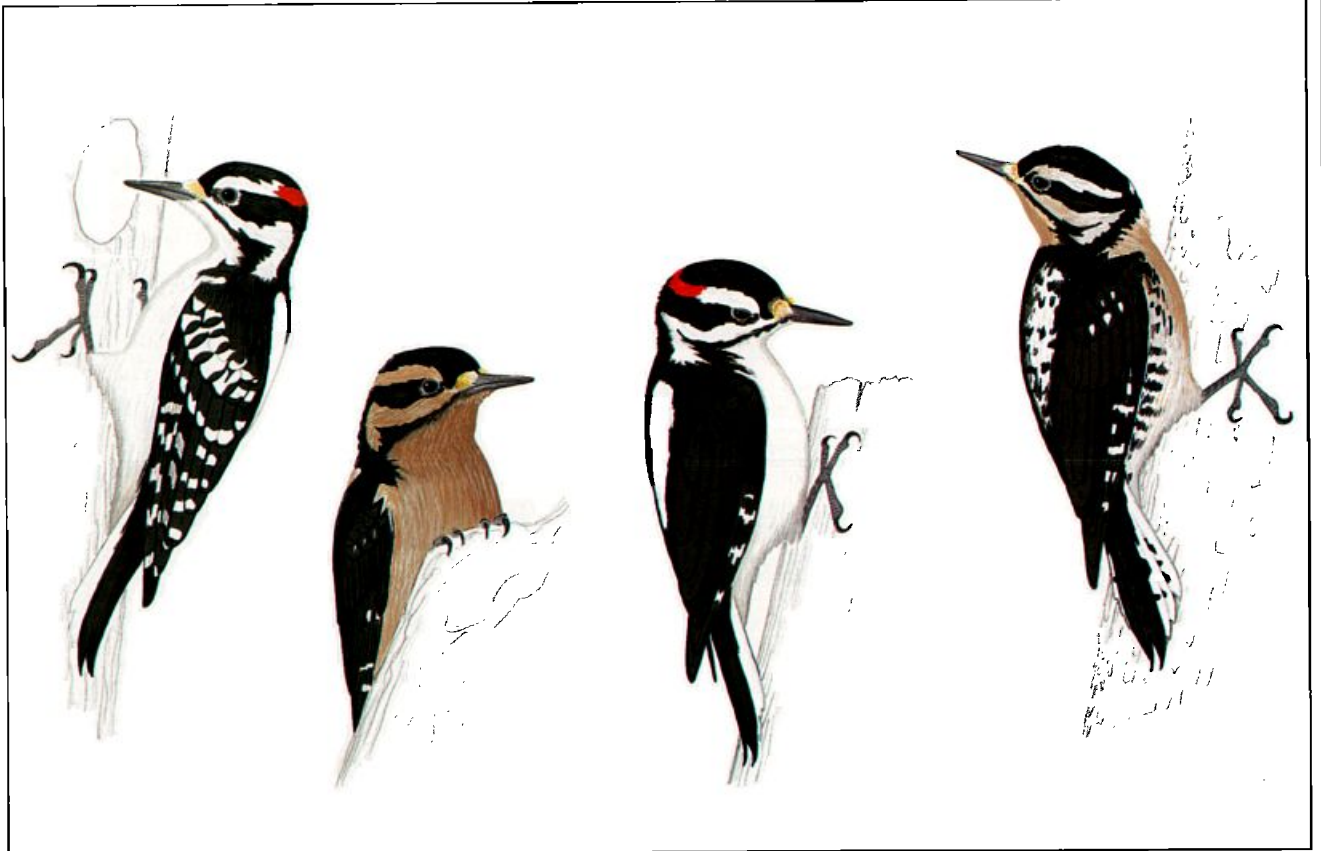
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does not sound any *longer*, but it packs in more notes and stays more or less on one pitch—often a slightly lower pitch than that of the “pick” note. One gets the impression that

one could almost count the notes in the Downy’s rattle (not quite, but almost), while the notes in the Hairy’s rapid-fire burst are much too rapid to count. I realize that written descriptions of sounds are hardly useful by themselves, but you might think about these descriptions the next time you listen to recordings, or to the woodpeckers themselves.

So far we’ve been comparing the Hairy Woodpecker only to the Downy (and to its own variable self), as if there were no other serious contenders. But a different kind of problem can arise in spring and summer, when juvenile Hairies are on the loose. Many juveniles are very similar to adults on a casual view. But others (as hinted at in the discussion of geographic variation) can give a different impression.

On adult Hairies, red shows up only on the nape, and only on males.



**Figure 2.** Some examples of geographic variation in Hairy Woodpeckers. Left: middle Atlantic coastal region of the eastern United States. The underparts are white, and the white spots in the wings are large and numerous. Second from left: Pacific Northwest. These birds have fewer white spots on the wings, and the white areas on the body and head are largely replaced by smoky brown. Third from left: central Rocky Mountains. Although the underparts are as white as on eastern birds, the wings are mostly black. Right: Queen Charlotte Islands, off British Columbia. Variable, but most are strikingly patterned. They regularly have prominent black spots and bars on the back, sides, and flanks; their underparts are usually washed with pale brown; many have black bars on the outer tail feathers (on many juveniles, much more conspicuous than shown on this adult).



**Figure 3.** Some points regarding juvenile Hairy Woodpeckers. Left: two variations on typical head patterns. The red patch is on the crown, not on the nape, and it may be present in females as well as males. It's my impression that the darker-faced juvenile Hairies occur in those populations that have fewer white spots on the wings, but I have not checked this thoroughly. Center: a variant juvenile Hairy Woodpecker from Newfoundland. This bird might easily be mistaken for a Three-toed Woodpecker, as it has barring on the back, barring on the flanks, and a yellow crown patch. All three of these variations seem to be possible in juveniles from many populations, although the black bars on the back and flanks seem to be most consistent and noticeable on those from Newfoundland and the Queen Charlotte Islands. Right: the head of an adult male Three-toed Woodpecker, for comparison.

But juveniles have the red patch centered on the crown; it may be large or small or essentially nonexistent, but it is present to a varying degree in both sexes. This patch varies in color as well, and it may be orange or even yellow. In any standard field guide, a woodpecker with a yellow crown patch and some white on the back would key out to Three-toed Woodpecker (*Picoides tridactylus*). Indeed, juvenile Hairies have been misidentified as such on many occasions, even as far afield as the Gulf Coast (where the sedentary and lethargic Three-toed would probably never turn up even if it wanted to). The resemblance to Three-toed Woodpecker is heightened by the fact that many juvenile Hairies have at least a trace of black barring on the flanks and on the back. This barring can be quite pronounced in many from the Maritime Provinces and from far western Canada.

In Figure 3, I illustrate a juvenile Hairy from Newfoundland with yellow crown patch, barred flanks, and barred back, a bird that easily could be mistaken for a Three-toed. While such extreme examples are not common, they do exist. To identify this

bird correctly, we would note the width of the white stripes on the face; the color of the tufts of feathers at the base of the upper mandible (mostly white in Hairy, mostly black in Three-toed); and if all else failed, we could take a close look and count the toes!

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Juvenile woodpeckers usually have a geeky air, a slight clumsiness that sets them apart from their elders. So an experienced birder might spot an inexperienced bird by its behavior alone. This brings us back to where we started, to the Hairy-versus-Downy problem, because practiced birders often get clues from what the woodpecker is doing at first glance.

The Hairy Woodpecker *acts* substantially bigger, all out of proportion to the size difference between the two, like a teenager trying to distance himself from his kid brother. The Downy will forage on minor twigs, clambering about like an overweight chickadee, and will even climb the stalks of weeds such as mullein. The Hairy demands trunks and major branches of real trees. (This is probably part of the reason why the Downy is found more often than the Hairy in suburbs and city parks). Climbing, the Downy proceeds in a jerky, fidgety crawl, while the Hairy hitches up in bolder leaps. In the air, the gentle rollercoaster undulations of the Downy can't compare with the swooping, bounding flight of the Hairy. These behavioral points can't be illustrated, but they help to define the appearance of each species for the observer who has watched both.

### Acknowledgements

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