

Downy Woodpecker

Downy Woodpecker

Appearance

Small black-and-white woodpecker with broad stripes on face, white below, black/white barring on wings and stiff, black tail. Relatively small, short, black bill. Our smallest woodpecker in DuPage County. Males have a red spot on the back of the head, females do not. Can be confused with its larger relative, the Hairy Woodpecker, but the Hairy is larger and has a relatively bigger, thicker bill.



Male



Female

Downy Woodpecker

ID Comparison to Hairy Woodpecker

Downies and Hairies look almost identical in their plumages, and new birdwatchers are often confused about which species they are seeing. Downies are smaller than Hairies – but that is only obvious when you see the two species together. When only one woodpecker is present, the key characteristic leading to a correct ID is the bill size relative to the head size. Hairies have a much longer and thicker bills compared to the size of their head than do Downies. Look for that very long/heavy bill to separate the two species. For a more complete comparison of the two species check out this DBC tutorial on this topic: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1_oS9OnFMU&t=8s.



Downy Woodpecker



Hairy Woodpecker

Downy Woodpecker Sounds

From The Cornell Lab of Ornithology <https://www.birds.cornell.edu/home/>

DRUMMING

Downy Woodpeckers do not sing like songbirds, but rather announce and defend their territories by drumming – rapidly tapping on tree trunks. It is very difficult to distinguish the drummings of various woodpecker species.

CALLS

Downies do make call notes in addition to drumming. The note is a sharp chip note or series of rapid chip notes. With practice, the Downy's chip note can be distinguished from that of the Hairy Woodpecker, which is louder and has two parts as opposed to the Downy's single note.

Listen to the calls at:

https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Downy_Woodpecker/sounds

Downy Woodpecker

Diet

The Downy Woodpecker's diet consists primarily of insect larva such as grubs and caterpillars as well as adult insects such as beetles.



Downy Woodpeckers use their bill to probe and dig out grubs and insects under the bark and in crevices of trees and other vegetation.

Downy Woodpecker

Diet

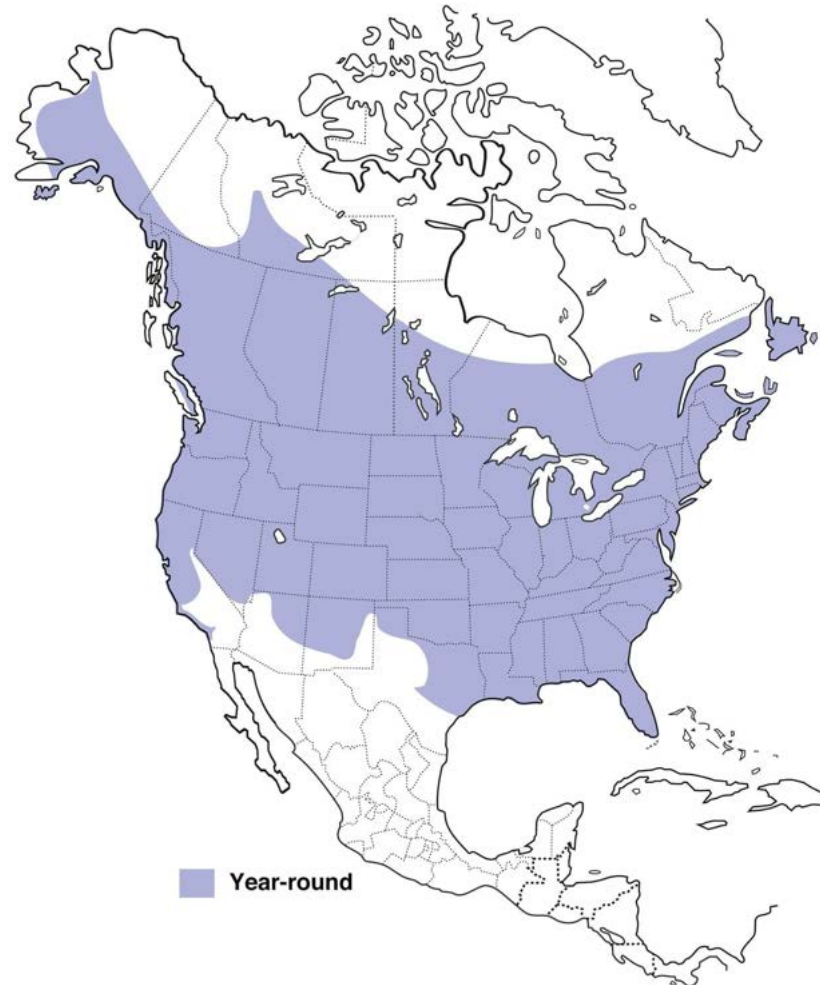
Downy Woodpeckers are also known to eat some seeds and fruits, particularly in winter.



Downy Woodpecker with a berry

Downy Woodpecker Range

Downy Woodpeckers can be seen in DuPage County year-round.



Downy Woodpecker

Habitat

Downy Woodpeckers are very dependent on trees for both nesting and foraging. They are birds of the forest and forest edges – so, as long as you have some trees you can expect to find Downy Woodpeckers. They need to have some older/dead trees to excavate their nest holes and for holes to roost in during the non-breeding season. Generally, you can find them in almost any woodlot since they do not require the larger forests frequented by Hairy Woodpeckers.



Male Downy Woodpecker at a nest hole

Downy Woodpecker

Habitat

Downy Woodpeckers forage not only on trunks and major limbs of trees, but also on minor branches and twigs (often climbing about acrobatically and hanging upside down), as well as on shrubs and weed stalks.



Downy Woodpecker feeding on a native sunflower.

Downy Woodpecker Habitat

You also can find them foraging in open fields, especially goldenrod fields in fall, where they extract insects from inside plant stems.



Male Downy Woodpecker clinging to a goldenrod gall.



Downy Woodpecker breaking open a goldenrod gall to get at the larvae inside.

Downy Woodpecker

Behavior

Most of the time, Downy Woodpeckers are seen moving up and down tree branches looking for food. They will tap the trees probing for insects, and you can often hear their gentle tap from the treetops.



Female Downy Woodpecker on a branch



Male Downy Woodpecker on a branch

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Behavior

Like other woodpeckers, Downy Woodpeckers have an undulating flight pattern where they alternate between a few rapid wingbeats and a short glide.



Downy Woodpecker in flight

Downy Woodpecker

Behavior

Downy Woodpeckers can be seen using their strong, stout bills to chip out small holes to extract their prey, and they use their stiff tail feathers to brace themselves against a branch or tree trunk. Outside of the nesting season, when they are busy defending territories and feeding young, they often associate with other permanent resident birds, such as chickadees and nuthatches, in small flocks.



Downy Woodpeckers use their stiff tail feathers to brace themselves against a branch or tree trunk.

Downy Woodpecker

Literature/Prose

The Downy Woodpecker is the symbol of the DuPage Birding Club.



DuPage
Birding Club

Downy Woodpecker Literature/Prose

Famed naturalist John Burroughs composed a poem about the Downy Woodpecker in 1911. The poem was written when Burroughs lived in isolation in New York. Burroughs noted that Downy Woodpeckers were near constant companions with him there. The final lines of the poem are shown to the right.

We are neighbors well agreed
Of a common lot;
Peace and love our only creed
In this charmed spot.



Downy Woodpecker Feeders

Downy Woodpeckers are a very common feeder bird.
They readily come to suet feeders and occasionally take sunflower seeds or peanut pieces from platform seed feeders.



Downy Woodpecker Names



Common name Downy Woodpecker

Downy refers to the soft tuft of nasal bristles above the bill present in the species.

Woodpecker refers to a family of birds that all use their stout bills to peel back bark and excavate holes in trees to uncover insects and make nest cavities.

Scientific name *Dryobates pubescens*

Dryobates – From the Greek *druous* meaning “woodland” and *bates* meaning “walker.”

pubescens – From the Latin *pubescere* meaning “downy” or “soft.”