



Which Woodpecker Is It?

Story and photographs by Doug Jolley

The diminutive downy woodpecker is a sociable bird that is unruffled by the nearness of people.

Two look-alike woodpecker species, the downy and the hairy, occur throughout West Virginia. *West Virginia Birds* by George A. Hall lists each as being “fairly common permanent residents.” Initially, distinguishing between these two bird species can be a challenge. But identification is easier once you get acquainted with them. December is a good month to get to know downy and hairy woodpeckers, since both species frequent feeders, especially suet stations.

Any bird guide will help you differentiate between these two similar-looking birds, but here is a brief overview. Both downy and hairy woodpeckers are black and white, and the male of both species has a red patch on the back of its head. The backs of both bird species, male and female, are pure white. Yet the downy, measuring approximately six and a half inches, is smaller. Also, sometimes black striping, which the hairy woodpecker does not have, can be noted on its white outer tail feathers.

At nine inches, the hairy woodpecker is essentially an enlarged version of the downy, but it has one strikingly differ-

ent feature: its massive bill. Whereas the downy’s bill is short and small, the hairy’s bill is long and big. The latter is often described as hammer- or chisel-like.

While at first glance it may still be hard to tell downy and hairy woodpeckers apart, their behaviors are very different and provide helpful information. The habits of these birds become apparent when you are out among them. It does not take long to notice that the downy is the more sociable of the two species. At feeding stations it will continue to eat, unbothered by your yard activities. It will interrupt its business only when closely approached. The downy will sometimes accompany foraging groups of chickadees, titmice, and nuthatches, which are often encountered on winter woodland walks.

The May 1933 issue of the journal *Nature* features an article by Fred E. Brooks titled “Making Bird Friends.” Among his list of birds that readily accept hand feeding is the downy woodpecker. My own experience confirms this, as when I visited Canada, I watched two children at a provincial park hand feeding black-capped chickadees, red-breasted nuthatches, and downy woodpeckers.

Conversely, the hairy woodpecker is not exactly a hermit

species, but it prefers more privacy. It will fly from the suet cake upon the mere opening of a door. The hairy woodpecker is also frustratingly adept at keeping a limb or a tree trunk between itself and a photographer. On winter walks, the hairy is that solitary black-and-white woodpecker in the distance. Its preference for tracts of mature woodlands allows this bird to go unnoticed throughout much of the year.

Not surprisingly, the call notes of the downy and hairy woodpecker are very similar. But whereas the downy's is a flat *pick* sound, the hairy's is a sharper, more forceful *peek!* sound. As a youthful birder, I could mimic each call to near perfection, often to the chagrin of both species. The downy also sounds a rapid whinny of notes that descend in pitch. The hairy woodpecker's vocalization sounds more like a rattle, more or less on one pitch.

I have observed that both downy and hairy woodpeckers are fond of the common mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*), a plant usually labeled a roadside weed by wildflower enthusiasts. Occurring throughout West Virginia, this plant features a large whorl of attractive, grayish-green leaves and four- to six-foot flowering stalks. The common mullein is a volunteer, and when it appears in suitable spots around my yard, providing

vertical accents to other plantings, I leave it alone. In other places, I weed it out.

Downy and hairy woodpeckers visit the common mullein once the flower stalks begin to mature and turn to a woody texture. The stalks are so stout that suet cakes can be attached to them. I have watched both woodpeckers glean insects from these miniature tree trunks. Only in late winter, when the stalks begin to decay, do I discard them.

Both downy and hairy woodpeckers are invaluable to the environment. Bird books written at the turn of the twentieth century tout the benefits of these birds to orchards and woodlands. They were, and still are, credited with helping to control wood-boring and other insects that are harmful to our landscape.

The downy and hairy woodpecker are two interesting birds that are enjoyed across our entire state year round. Once you've noted their distinguishing features and behaviors, you'll know who has come to brighten your landscape and dine at your feeders or plantings. 🐦

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▲ **The hairy woodpecker is** larger than the downy and its bill is much longer.

◀ **The common mullein hosts** insects that attract birds like this downy woodpecker.

(Left) **A downy woodpecker's bill** is short and small. Both downy and hairy woodpecker males have a red spot on the back of their head.