

# Bird of the Month: Sapsuckers

By Ryan Crouse

## Sapsuckers: Those Other Woodpeckers

When observed through the lens of even an armchair naturalist, the collective perception of the natural world around us can at times be eyebrow-raising. However, it's always best to approach these perceptions with humility and soft-handed education.

I say this to address one of the funnier recurring comments I've heard over the years: some variation of, "We don't have woodpeckers here."

It's a reasonable assumption for a layperson, given Arizona's relatively limited woodland habitats compared to other regions. Ironically, however, Arizona boasts one of the most diverse woodpecker populations in the nation! The *Arizona Breeding Bird Atlas* lists no less than twelve species that regularly breed in the state, with a few others appearing sporadically. Further, we can find most of them in the Prescott area.

Arizona's *picidae* population doesn't show dramatic migratory fluctuations. Populations remain stable through the year, with one exception being the genus *sphyrapicus*, commonly known as sapsuckers. They are absent from Arizona's Central Highlands during the summer months, and reappear when the air turns chilly. As the hot days of summer wane, it won't be long before I spot one working the trunk of a backyard pinyon pine.

Our most common example is the red-naped sapsucker, named for the bright red patch on the nape of its head. This mark distinguishes it from its close relative, the yellow-bellied sapsucker. Next time you're walking through a thicket of scrub oak, inspect the interior limbs. You likely won't get far before finding a series of horizontally aligned holes on the larger parts of a tree; these are sapsucker wells. They drill shallow holes only to return later to lap up the pitch from the wounded tree and consume any insects trapped in the sticky resin. Other species, including Anna's hummingbirds and ruby-crowned kinglets, also use these wells, in the same fashion.

While I've fielded countless concerns from homeowners worried that "the woodpecker will kill their tree," such fears are largely unfounded. Our region has endless examples of healthy trees and shrubs that have hosted sapsuckers for many years without harm.

Sapsuckers are medium-sized woodpeckers, often sporting the classic black, white and red colors typical of many woodpeckers. A key distinguishing feature that all sapsuckers

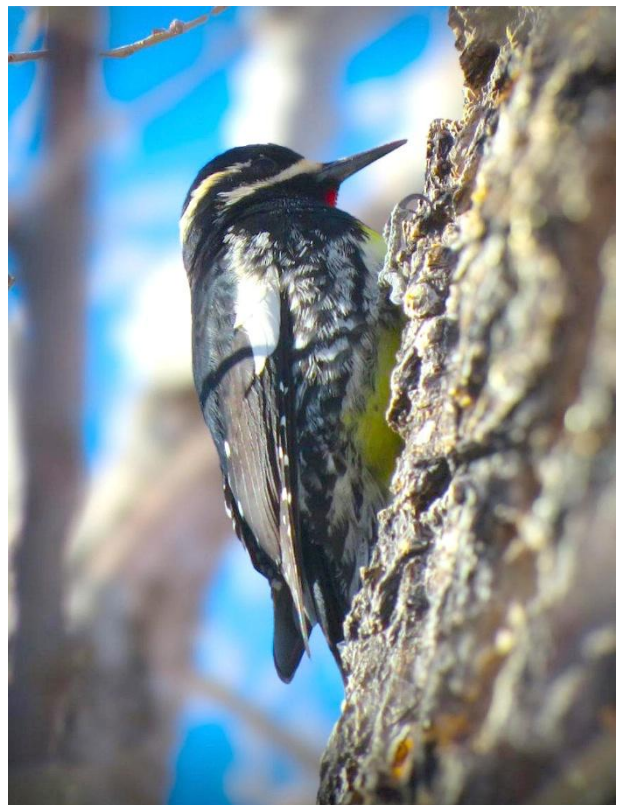
share is a large, longitudinal white wing bar that's hard to miss. Another thing to notice is the yellowish belly, which varies in intensity and distribution depending on the species.

You may find the red-naped sapsucker in a variety of habitats in our region, but it tends to favor lower-strata foliage such as pinyon pine, scrub oak and fruit trees, which make it an accessible backyard species. In contrast, Williamson's sapsuckers are less common and prefer the upper trunks and limbs of tall pines. Spotting them often requires trekking into Ponderosa forests during the colder months, listening for faint, irregular tapping sounds, then craning your neck in hopes of catching sight of one high in the canopy. After all of that, what you heard is much more likely to be a nuthatch. Because of this, Williamson's sapsuckers are usually much harder to find — usually.

As soon as you make a definitive statement about birds, they will prove you wrong.

During the 2024 Christmas Bird Count I was scouring Diamond Valley with two fellow birders, Rose and Rebekah. As we walked down a neighborhood street, one of them casually mentioned spotting a bird in a tree. The tree, a non-native locust in a relatively sterile yard, didn't seem promising for an exciting discovery.

What Rebekah had found, however, was a very unexpected Williamson's sapsucker, perched in the middle of a residential area surrounded by high-desert chaparral! It turned out to be the bird of the day, primarily because of its unusual habitat. The many fresh wells on the upper trunk indicated to me that the bird had been there for several days. I suppose it figured the tree offered enough sustenance without much competition, so why not stay a while?



*Williamson's Sapsucker by R Delisanti*

It was awesome to see fellow birders experiencing this striking species for the first time, while I assured them that it's not typically this easy to find a Williamson's!

This year seems to be something of an irruptive year for sapsuckers, which might explain this atypical sighting. There have been many reports of redheaded sapsuckers and the

aforementioned yellow-bellied sapsuckers, both of which are somewhat rare in Arizona. Remarkably, over the course of a day and with some effort, it's possible to see all four North American sapsucker species right here in Prescott. We do indeed have woodpeckers in Arizona.

So, grab your binoculars and brush up on this unique group of birds! How many woodpecker species can you find in one month?

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