

## Ladder-backed Woodpecker (LbW)

**T**HE LADDER-BACKED WOODPECKER is a striking bird that resides year-round in Eldorado. The back is covered by distinctive black and white stripes from the base of the tail to the neck. The breast is light tan with indistinct spotting. The head is white or light gray, with a strong black crown streak, a black eye stripe and a black stripe from a sharp chisel-shaped, longish bill. The eye and beak stripe join and turn down the neck. The male has a bright red crown which extends to the eye. Strangely, juveniles of both sexes have a small amount of red on the crown.

The LbW is 7.25 inches long, with a wingspan of 13 inches. Its habitat is usually desert, arid scrub, piñon-juniper woodlands and sometimes towns. The size and general coloration are similar to the Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers. However, these two both show large white areas on their backs. The LbW has a relatively small U.S. range, covering western Texas, southern New Mexico and Arizona and a small area in southwest California. They also live throughout Central America.

The male courts with bobbing and turning, raising the red crest, and spreading wings. Pairs are monogamous (probably over several years). Nest holes are lined with chips in dead or decaying trees, posts and cactus (live trees are not suitable because of

sap filling the hole). Two to six eggs are brooded by male and female and hatch in 13 days and fledge in 20 to 25 days. Their diet is insects and fruit, including cactus. A loud one-note sharp call is often heard from woodpeckers. Both males and females communicate over long distances by drumming to attract a mate or mark territory.

As mentioned in other woodpecker articles, these birds have special adaptations which allow them to function: special head bones, very long barbed tongues, feet with two toes forward and two back, and stiff tails. Woodpeckers also lay white eggs (probably because camouflage is not needed in cavities). Tail feathers are stiff and can be manipulated by large muscles. The two central feathers are pointed with ridges and have barbs curving inward toward a tree. Because these two feathers are so important, the molt pattern is different from most birds. After all other tail feathers have grown in, these two are replaced.

My local pair shows up within a half-hour on the first day I start putting suet out during winter months!

Note on the Ivory-billed Woodpecker: 2009 will be the third and probably last year to search for this bird in Arkansas. The lack of conclusive sightings so far may indicate that the species is extinct.

—Pam Henline



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