

Downy Woodpecker *Picoides pubescens*



Folk Name: Checkerback

Status: Resident

Abundance: Common

Habitat: Woodlands, forested neighborhoods and parks

At just under 7 inches, the Downy Woodpecker is our smallest woodpecker, but it is one of the most common birds in the region. The Downy and the Hairy Woodpecker are closely related and are very similar in appearance, but at just over 9 inches, the Hairy Woodpecker is noticeably larger. Both are black-and-white patterned with a large white patch on their back, and they are all-white below. The Downy's bill is short, while the Hairy's is noticeably larger—about the same length as its head. Adult males of both species have a small red mark on the back of their head. Both species have black, characteristically stiff woodpecker tails that help them balance as they climb trees. Their outer tail feathers are white, but the Downy's has black spots while the Hairy's are all white. Their behavior differs as well. The Downy appears curious and often seems unafraid of people, while the Hairy can be notoriously cautious and shy. Their calls are distinctly different as well. Both species eat mostly insects.

Not all woodpeckers forage solely on trees. Downy Woodpeckers can be seen in this region foraging in abandoned fields in late fall and winter. They often rely upon gall insects as a supplemental food source for winter survival. Galls are ball-shaped structures that are often found growing on the stalks of our abundant fall goldenrod flowers (*Solidago* spp.). The woodpeckers seek

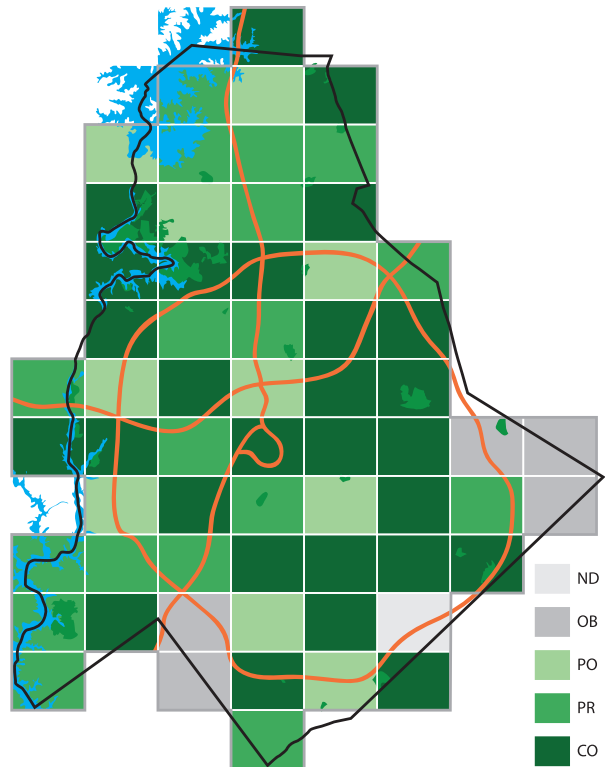


out galls, probe them, and then prey upon the larvae of gall flies, parasitic wasps, and certain beetles that have hatched within. They seem to prefer the largest galls and the ones highest from the ground.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, both Loomis and McIlwaine reported the Downy Woodpecker as a common permanent resident in the region, and this small



Downy Woodpecker nest hole in a dead limb of a living white oak. (Leigh Anne Carter)



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Nearly Ubiquitous (PR/18, CO/28)

woodpecker remains common. It makes the lists of both the top 35 birds recorded on Christmas Bird Counts and the top 50 birds recorded on Spring Bird Counts in the Central Carolinas. It is a common visitor to bird feeders in urban and suburban areas.

Breeding activity of the Downy Woodpecker begins early and lasts until at least late spring. Bill and Laura Blakesley observed a pair of Downy Woodpeckers actively excavating a nest cavity on January 16, 2011, along the Four Mile Creek Greenway while a pair of Brown-headed Nuthatches kept trying to get a look inside. Mecklenburg County BBA volunteers observed Downy Woodpeckers nesting in a variety of places: a cavity about 6 feet off the ground in an 8-inch-diameter sweetgum tree; a hole about 5 feet off the ground in the siding of a residential home; and in a hole about 20 feet off the ground in a dead limb of a living white oak. The adults at the latter nest were observed gathering suet at a bird feeder and feeding it to their young who “poked their head out of nest hole” on 2 May.



A male Downy Woodpecker. (Gary P. Carter)