

## Northern Flicker *Colaptes auratus*



**Folk Name:** Yellow-shafted Flicker, Whicker-whacker, Yellowhammer, Checker

**Status:** Resident

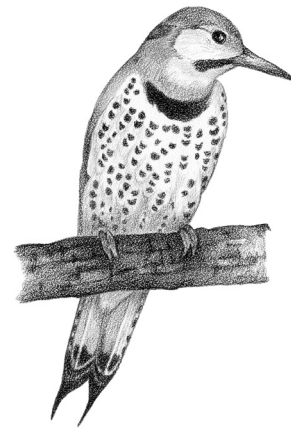
**Abundance:** Fairly Common

**Habitat:** Open woodlands, parks, neighborhoods

The Northern Flicker is virtually unmistakable. It is our second largest woodpecker, just over a foot long, and it has several distinctive markings. It has a black-spotted belly with a black crescent on the breast. Its back is brown with dark barring, and it has a large white rump patch easily observed in flight. Its two-tone head is ashy gray above with a red crescent on the gray nape. Its face and throat are brown, and males have a black “moustache” or malar stripe. Perhaps its most striking feature is the yellow color of both the feathers and feather shafts that are obvious on the underwing and tail in flight. The flicker gets its common name from its occasional call of *flicka-flicka-flicka*. Unlike most woodpeckers, it is most often seen foraging on the ground.

In the nineteenth century in the Carolina Piedmont, the flicker was designated a “common” resident in summer, “abundant during its migrations,” and “very common in winter.” The flicker was one of the birds highlighted after the Civil War for their importance to the protection of agriculture. An article in *The Charlotte Democrat* on March 22, 1870, titled “Birds should not be Killed,” recommended “the protection of the whole class of insectivorous birds should at once become a subject of national consideration” and specifically noted the helpfulness of the flicker, among others, as “the flicker feeds on ants.” In an article titled “Birds to be Spared,” published in *The Charlotte Democrat* on October 26, 1894, many birds are given high praise for their usefulness in eating destructive insects, and the public is asked to refrain from shooting them: “[The meadowlark] is game in the quality of being alert, and hard to get a shot at, but is no more entitled to be so classified than the flicker, or highholder is.” Unfortunately, the flicker was a favorite target of gunners during this time. Early North Carolina hunting laws specifically included the flicker in an attempt to protect it:

“While Game Warden Upchurch was on his rounds he procured the arrest and punishment of a man in Cabarrus who killed three robins and a golden woodpecker, often known as a yellow hammer or flicker, and the man was fined a dollar for each bird so killed, and was put in the sheriff’s custody until he paid the fine. The Audubon law has, as is but natural in the



new law, some defects, but it will be amended by the next Legislature and in various ways improved.” —*The Charlotte Observer*, March 30, 1904

By 1908, the flicker had become harder to find in Charlotte. Dr. J.B. Alexander bemoaned the “loss” of the Yellowhammer in the city:

The yellow-hammer that used to be so abundant, is now almost extinct. Fifty years ago they would collect in vast quantities in the fall and winter months on the black gum shade trees to feed upon the berries. All winter they could be seen coming in all directions to partake of their accustomed meal. The time of a very cold spell I have seen them by the thousands, clinging to the twigs of the gums. I never heard of them eating grain or doing any mischief. They are as large as a dove or partridge; their flesh is equal to any bird that has been common in this part of the state. Their plumage was not gaudy, but very pretty, with a red top-not, speckled breast and yellow lining to the wings. On the whole, we are sorry the yellow hammer is now extinct.

Fortunately, hunting pressure was reduced and the flicker remained a resident bird throughout the region, even in Charlotte. William McIlwaine kept a regular eye on flicker activities in the city in the late 1920s and early 1930s. On June 28, 1926, McIlwaine wrote:

Two weeks ago a little nine-year old girl told me she knew of a nest hole with five white eggs in it. I thought I had it spotted. And sure-enough I found it was a flicker’s nest. It was in an apple tree about a

foot or fifteen inches down in a hole the mouth of which was six feet from the ground. The eggs are china white and quite round-ish. The child told me there had been four eggs, which had been taken out of the nest before the flicker laid these five. Then she was setting. And by the way,—I had thought flickers very shy. They are all over this country. I have seen one in my backyard here in Charlotte. And in Myers Park, a very nice suburb, they are a nuisance as they make holes in the eaves of people's houses. The nest I am speaking of is not more than 75 or 100 ft. from a street that was just paved in the last few weeks. (That nest had on its floor little chips of wood.) Question—How will the baby birds get out of that deep hole?

McIlwaine also reported seeing flickers that November. The following year, McIlwaine was monitoring a Northern Flicker nest in Latta Park when he learned that the nest had been robbed and one young bird killed by a young boy:

Mr. Helms, the [park] keeper, “a policeman,” had told the other boys to catch him and bring him back. It had taken them blocks to do it, but they had overtaken him as he was making for home. . . . I was sorry to hear what happened. But I know that all up and down the branch that starts right here at the flicker's hole and runs on to Sugaw Creek, the boys have been robbing birds' nests.

On March 26, 1928, McIlwaine observed the courtship activity of the flicker:

Out again. This morning I am most impressed with the absurd courting of the flickers. Their “yooker-yooker-yooker-yooker” is curious sounding. But their dance is passing strange. They will sit facing each other on a limb absolutely motionless. Then

both together will begin swaying their heads and bodies from side to side, or cavort around calling yooker.”

After a walk in Latta Park on April 1, 1929, he wrote: “Miss McHenry was interested in the building operations of a flicker. That is, if the excavations can be called building operations. First sitting on the outside, propped up by tail feathers. Then on its head in the hole, coming out with big chips of wood. Some wood-cutter.” He later recorded 15 Northern Flickers in Charlotte on January 1, 1929, and noted them as “common all year” and especially abundant during migration each March.

A decade later, John H. Grey, co-founder of the Carolina Bird Club and the first editor of *The Chat*, collected a specimen of Northern Flicker in Davidson on June 7, 1939, and deposited it at the North Carolina State Museum in Raleigh. This specimen can be still be examined today.

In the 1940s, Elizabeth Clarkson reported on the activities of flickers in Charlotte. She closely observed their lives while they nested in her yard at Wing Haven. She described the spring courtship of the flicker as being comical. “Usually more than one male courts at the same time and they bow and scrape before her good-naturedly and talk constantly while doing so.” One nest was confirmed in the spring of 1943. Two years later, Clarkson provided nest boxes for the flickers and wrote in a letter to noted author Charlotte Hilton Green that:

[The] Flicker is calling (in protest, I think about the Starlings liking his box). This winter he has had Screech-Owls, flying squirrels, and Starlings to contend with. I'll take his side next spring and help him if he needs it, but in the mean time his struggles are what makes life interesting and there are other holes his size. I love that amazing character and his success is very important to me. In the summer, while we eat on the porch we watch his antics at the nest and we enjoy the clowning of the babies.

On May 28, 1961, along the Catawba River, Frank Ramsey observed a Yellow-shafted Flicker cleaning out the nest hole of a Pileated Woodpecker, apparently for its own use. On July 4th, he watched the flicker enter the hole. The bird did not emerge for over 1 ½ hours and Ramsey speculated that it was on the nest and incubating its eggs during that time.

Unfortunately, populations of this woodpecker have been in decline since the 1960s. Scientists studying this species are greatly concerned:

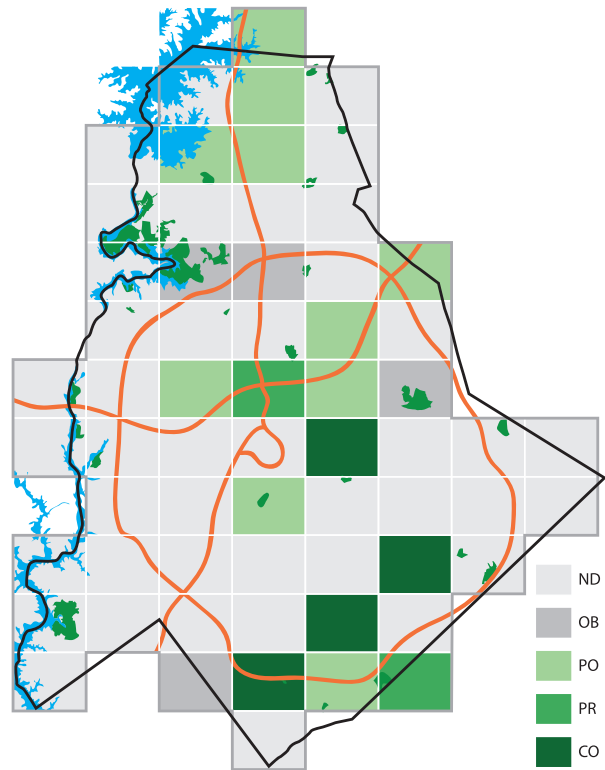
Although Northern Flicker remains common, its declining abundance, evident since 1966, is alarming. No rigorous, focused studies identify the cause of this decline; 3 hypotheses: (1) competition from European Starlings for nest



Male Northern Flicker foraging on the ground. (Jeff Lemons)

cavities (2) declining availability of suitable nest-cavity substrate (snags, dead limbs, and live trees with heart rot and (3) pesticide application on golf courses, agricultural fields and suburban lawns.

In Mecklenburg County, the flicker has dropped in rank from 38th to the 63rd most common bird recorded on Spring Bird Counts. Christmas Bird Counts indicate a drop from 26th to 33rd place. Data collected during the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas indicate a breeding code of confirmed or probable in six survey blocks for this species in the county. It was therefore designated as a “vulnerable” breeding bird.



### Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

*Local (PR/2, CO/4)*