

# Male-Female Interactions by Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers on Wintering Grounds

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On 23 March 2002, in my wooded yard near Zebulon, Wake County, NC, I watched two Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers (*Sphyrapicus varius*), a male and a female, engage in behavior I had never before witnessed. The male was perched on the trunk of a small hickory (*Carya* sp.) having bark riddled with sapsucker wells. The female flew to the tree and perched a short distance above the male. Both birds faced the top of the tree. He followed her to the top, she flew to the base of the tree, and he followed her to the top again. The two repeated the ascents several more times, with much head-bobbing by the male and loud vocalization throughout, mostly by the male. Then the two flew away together, for a distance of more than 100 m, judging by the persistent calling. Both returned to the tree, still calling, and the male followed the female up the trunk once again; but this time he attempted to mount her. Both birds took to the air and, facing each other, hovered briefly. Suddenly the calling ceased. The female flew away, and the male returned to "his" tree.

The activity drew an audience of Carolina Chickadees (*Parus carolinensis*) and Tufted Titmice (*Parus bicolor*), which, like the human observer, were completely ignored by the sapsuckers.

The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker breeds mostly in parts of Canada, the north-central United States, and New England, southward in the Appalachian Mountains to western North Carolina (see range map in Sibley 2000), where it is "a rare to uncommon, local, and erratic summer resident mainly above 3,500 feet in disturbed or open oak and northern hardwood forests from late April through September" (Simpson 1992). The species winters mostly from Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, the Ohio Valley, and New Jersey southward on the Atlantic Coast to Florida and westward on the Gulf Coast to Texas and throughout Middle America (except much of northwestern Mexico and portions of Panama) and eastward to the Bahamas and the Antilles (American Ornithologists' Union 1983).

Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers generally arrive in central North Carolina during the first two weeks of October, though an adult male was seen in Zebulon on the early date of 22 September 1965 (Potter, unpublished notes). They generally depart during late April, the latest known observation date being 29 April at Raleigh (Pearson et al. 1942).

All available accounts of sapsucker behavior on the wintering grounds in the Southeast generally agree on their solitary habits. Sprunt and Chamberlain (1970) state that each bird "appears to have an extensive feeding territory, and it is unusual to encounter more than a single specimen in a large tract of woodland."

Other than feeding habits, little is known about Yellow-bellied Sapsucker behavior on the wintering grounds. However, one sapsucker banded at Chapel Hill, NC, was recaptured there in a subsequent season (Kennard 1975). I operated a banding station in my yard from May 1967 through November 1972. During that period I banded six Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, all hatching year (HY) birds except one adult male netted in October 1971 and found dead in January 1972. Prior to the events of 23 March 2002, I recorded two sapsuckers present in my yard simultaneously only three times, all recent arrivals in October. Two males, one adult and one HY bird, were present on 12 October 1966. Two HY birds were netted simultaneously on 12 October 1969. A male was banded and the other escaped. The latter apparently was the HY female banded the following day. On 4 October 1970 two sapsuckers were present, but their age and sex were not recorded. There certainly is no indication that adults and offspring share a winter feeding territory, and none that siblings or mated pairs do so. However, there is a possibility that individuals with neighboring winter feeding territories might encounter one another occasionally and engage in some precursory courtship activity.

Accounts of courtship behavior in the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (Bent 1939, Kilham 1962) agree that the males are first to arrive on the breeding grounds and the females arrive several days later. Courtship and copulation take place in the vicinity of the chosen nest tree. A new cavity is generally excavated by the pair, but reuse of a cavity sometimes occurs. Because some males exhibit site fidelity (Kilham 1962), it is possible that the females also return to the site of a previous nesting.

Winsor Marrett Tyler wrote (*in* Bent 1939) that in spring “the sapsucker is light-hearted and jaunty compared to the sober, quiet bird that visited us the autumn before. The breeding season is near at hand, and if two birds meet they often engage in a sort of game, a precursory courtship, wherein one bird flies at the other in a playful attack; the other eludes the rush of the oncoming bird by a sudden, last-minute retreat winding around the branch on which it rests, or sliding off into the air. In these pursuits in and out among the branches we are impressed by the agility and grace of the birds and by the easy way they direct their course through the air. They seem to swing from branch to branch with little effort, slowly opening and closing their wings to guide them on their way. As we watch them we are reminded of trapeze artists in the circus.”

The behavior I witnessed can hardly be deemed graceful, though the attempted copulation does suggest precursory courtship. However, the activity as a whole seemed more like a lovers' quarrel than pair bonding. In retrospect, the male's attempt to mount the female may have been an aggressive movement in defense of his feeding site. If so, he was successful.

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