

## Birds of Green Valley Lake

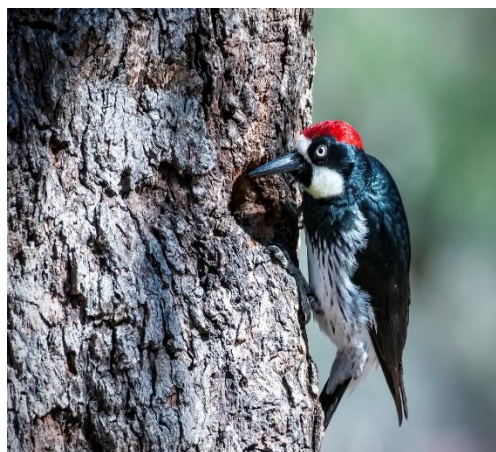
By Patrick Huckaby

Spring has returned to Green Valley Lake, so if you have filled your bird feeder on the deck and put some water in the birdbath, you will start to see the dramatic annual return of our mountain birds. Actually, some "full-timers" have been here all winter. For example, that large, noisy blue bird with the black Mohawk haircut is of course **Steller's Jay**. Most often it's just called a Blue Jay, but true Blue Jays don't have the crest on their head and are found back East. The Jays are in the crow family, so share their intelligence and squawking voice. Recent DNA research has traced the crow family back to pre-historic Australia from where they spread all over the world.



The Jays however are only found in the Americas. Steller's Jays are very agile; they can hold an acorn with their feet while they peck at it with their lower bill, which has a special flange to enable it to withstand the pounding. Like the rest of the crow family, Jays are great mimics; the Steller's Jay often imitates the cry of a hawk, which they seem to do to scare other birds -- kind of a jay joke. Surprisingly for a mountain bird, jay chicks are hatched completely un-feathered and helpless; hence the term "naked as a jay bird."

Another holdover most of the winter has been the **Mountain Chickadee**. These are the little sparrow-sized birds with a black "bib" under their chin and a black and white striped face. They are almost totally fearless; they will drink from a water dish while you are filling it. They are champion spider catchers, sometimes hanging upside down under the eaves or deck looking for spiders and their egg sacks. Chickadees don't migrate, but they do move to lower elevations when the mountains get too cold or stormy. They love a feeder with sunflower seeds; they will spend hours taking sunflower seeds from a feeder into the woods, hiding them in crevices in tree bark. It's a wonder we don't see sunflowers sprouting from pine trees. Chickadees are also very smart. In the 1920's when milk was delivered in glass bottles, they learned to peck open the foil lid to drink the cream underneath, probably figuring people just forgot to put some in their feeder. Mountain Chickadees are one of many birds that build their nests in old woodpecker nest holes.



Speaking of woodpeckers, they have also been around during the winter, wandering to lower elevations if the winter is too severe. The woodpeckers most seen around a feeder are the **Acorn Woodpecker**, the **White-Headed Woodpecker**, and the **Northern Flicker**.

The **Acorn Woodpecker** has a black and white body and wings, a long pointed beak, and a bright red cap on its head. They are named for their practice of ramming acorns into

rows of holes they make in dead trees; one study counted 60,000 acorns in one tree that several birds were using.

The **White-Headed Woodpecker** is a little smaller and lacks the red cap. It specializes in Ponderosa Pines where it pecks off pieces of bark to grab the insects. If you watch closely, you'll notice that woodpeckers only move upwards while hunting for bugs on a tree trunk; their tail feathers have evolved into stiff props to lean back on while they are climbing. They listen for bugs (including bark beetles) under the bark, then peck an opening, then use their long sticky tongue to pull the bug out. The tongue can extend five inches past the bill; it coils up in their skull around their right eye. Luckily for all the birds that use their nest holes, the Acorn Woodpeckers are especially good hole drillers. Sometimes they will even have two, one for breeding and one for brooding in the fall -- like having a vacation home to get away



from the kids. They are also "co-operative breeders" which means the young from the year before will stay and help raise the new brood -- like your 20-year-old living at home helping to baby sit. Sometimes you'll see three or four the same age hanging around together at the feeder, squabbling over who gets to go first just like teen-aged brothers everywhere.

The shyest and most beautiful of the woodpeckers is the **Northern Flicker**. It is slightly larger than the other woodpeckers and has a mostly brown body with black spots and a red "smear" near its beak. When it flies is when it really stands out; the underside of its wings is a bright orange, almost pink. When it spreads its wings it's

like a neon light. Like all woodpeckers it drums on hollow trees to attract females and warn off other males; however, the Flicker, looking for more volume, has been known to use gutter downspouts, oil drums, or metal chimneys. He's kind of the rock drummer of the woodpeckers. The female is a champion egg layer. She normally lays from three to twelve eggs, but in an experiment, scientists kept removing all the eggs except one so the female kept laying to replace them. She ended up laying seventy eggs in one season! We can only hope they gave her lots of bark beetles as a reward.

In late winter **Dark Eyed Juncos** become very common at the bird feeder. They are the gray sparrow-like birds with the black "cow" covering their heads and necks. Our local ones used to be known as "Oregon Juncos" but lately experts have decided that the "Oregon" wasn't really a different species. They also are called "snowbirds" because they are around for so much of the winter. The males are the ones with the black hoods; the females look like sparrows. The males like to bully the chickadees around but are soon overcome by the sheer obnoxiousness of the chickadees.



Very similar in coloring to the chickadees are the **Nuthatches**; they are also gray-bodied with black and white stripes, but their heads are more pointed and their beaks are much longer. The nuthatches hunt for bugs on the tree bark like woodpeckers; however, they scramble up and down the tree, whereas the woodpeckers only move upwards. The **Pygmy Nuthatch** is the same size as the chickadees so you have to look closely to tell them apart. During cold spells in the winter the pygmy nuthatches will share old woodpecker tree cavities; a biologist once found over a hundred cuddled up in a single large hole.



The pygmy specializes in pine forests while the White-Breasted Nuthatch prefers oak forests. It is larger with more white and an even more pointed beak. The white-breasted nuthatch catches foul smelling insects and then smears their smashed bodies around the nest hole to keep predators away -- especially Steller's Jays.

Arriving in late March are the **Robins** and **Western Bluebirds**, which are both in the thrush family. Robins, of course, are common all over the country and will sometimes visit a water dish or feeder. Much more specific to the mountain region is the Western Bluebird. The male looks like a smaller version of the robin with an orange-red breast, but its back and wings are a bright blue. They depend on open woodlands to feed on insects and berries; their

soft beaks can't handle hard seeds or acorns. They especially like suet feeders. The number of Western Bluebirds is declining, probably due to loss of habitat and competition for nesting sites. Programs that put up nesting boxes have been successful for the Eastern Bluebird, but it seems the Western Bluebird is choosier and prefers only natural housing.



A bird often blamed for the housing shortage is the **Starling**. These are the skinny medium-sized, all black birds. They have only been in North America since 1850 but have spread from coast to coast to the point that they are now considered natives. They were previously found only in Europe, but some were brought in to eat moth larva on trees in New York's Central Park, and then a bird collector brought more over because he felt that that the States should contain all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare's plays. The small groups quickly multiplied, and by 1950 had reached the west coast to take over many habitats and nesting sites from other birds, including the Western Bluebird .

Another "bad-guy" who shows up in late March is the **Brown-Headed Cowbird**, a member of the black bird family who looks like a starling except for the brown head. These birds breed like cuckoos; they are nest parasites. The female looks for other bird's nests with eggs and lays hers in their nest. She's not



particular about whose nest she uses, so if her chick is larger than the rightful owner it will push out the other chicks. The poor owners of the nest keep feeding the cowbird as if it were their own chick. Brown-Headed Cowbirds used to be found only on the Great Plains with the buffalo herds, but have spread across the country and nobody quite knows why.

Also arriving in March is **Cassin's Finch**. This is the sparrow-sized bird with the thick beak, and the males have a bright red head and throat. Cassin's Finch is a high altitude specialist. His cousin the House Finch lives at sea level, and



his cousin the **Purple Finch** lives in-between at medium altitudes, but as is known to happen with human cousins, there is some inter-breeding at the borders. If the males are not getting enough insects in their diets, the red in their feathers will turn yellow, just like flamingoes in zoos lose their pink color when not fed shrimp.

Arriving from Mexico and landing like a 747 next to the water dish is the huge **Band-Tailed Pigeon**. More obvious than its tail is the white collar around its neck. If you watch closely when it drinks, you will notice something unique. It can dip its head and suck the water down its throat; other birds take a mouthful and then lift their heads to let it run down their throats. Only pigeons and doves can drink like this.



Also arriving from Mexico in April and May is the beautiful **Black-Headed Grosbeak** of the cardinal family. They could be called "Halloween birds" because of their bright stripes of orange and black and white. Like their name suggests, they have very thick almost parrot-like beaks for cracking cones and acorns. Unlike other male birds, the male grosbeak gets its bright adult plumage a year after they are sexually mature. This means that every summer you have a bunch of frustrated male grosbeaks waiting for their feathers to change -- just like human teen-age boys without a car.

on dandelion seeds, so aren't found in thick forest. When courting a female, the male goldfinch will display nesting material as if suggesting what a superior nest architect he is; however, after mating, the male sits nearby and sings while the female builds the nest. Female bird watchers never fail to point this behavior out to their male colleagues.

In early summer you will see the **Lesser Goldfinch** at the water dish or at a feeder that has thistle seeds. They have the finch brown-gray body, but the males have a bright neon-yellow breast. They mainly feed



And finally the star of the show makes his entrance. This bird is so showy that his picture is on the cover of many bird books. The



**Western Tanager** was first described on the Louis and Clark Expedition in 1803. If you are fortunate enough to see one, you won't forget it. The male has a vivid, iridescent yellow body. The yellow gradually becomes a bright red as it reaches his head, and his wings are yellow, black, and white stripes. The tanager feeds on bees, wasps, and beetles but also likes the "non-seed" type of feeder. It will eat fruit, bread pieces, peanut butter, even a donut or two -- kind of a Homer Simpson diet. It spends the winter in

South America and makes its way north to breed in May or June. By the end of July it's on its way back south so we don't get much of its time; consider yourself lucky if you get a visit.

