

Downy Woodpecker

Picoides pubescens

The Downy Woodpecker's range is extensive, though not quite as broad as that of the Hairy Woodpecker. Downy Woodpeckers breed from southeastern Alaska across Canada to Newfoundland and south to southern California, the Southwest, and the southeastern U.S. through Florida (Short 1982). Although primarily resident within its range, most northern populations are migratory. In Vermont, it is largely a resident but is sometimes migratory. Downies have been seen moving south during fall hawk watches (W. J. Norse, pers. observ.). In winter, the species is quite common throughout the U.S., but appears to be most abundant in the middle Atlantic states and the Midwest (Plaza 1978). Feeding stations may encourage Downy Woodpeckers to overwinter rather than to migrate (Lawrence 1967).

In the eastern portion of its range the Downy Woodpecker inhabits many forest types, including northern hardwoods, oak-hickory, and mixed deciduous-coniferous, as well as edge habitats (Short 1982). It is found in small woodlots and large tracts of forest, as well as in orchards, residential areas, and city parks. Although the Downy's habitat overlaps the Hairy's, the Downy has a wider range of habitats (Conner 1981). More than other woodpeckers, Downy Woodpeckers use woodlands with small basal areas and low canopies (Conner and Adkisson 1977).

The best way of locating Downy Woodpeckers during the breeding season is by their calls and drumming. The commonly heard pik call is usually given in alarm. The territorial signal, a drumming that substitutes for a song and is usually done on a resonant stub, is not as loud as the drumming of the Hairy. Territorial advertisement and aggressive encounters are accompanied by the rattle, "a series [of notes] dropping in pitch and shortening through the call" (Short 1982).

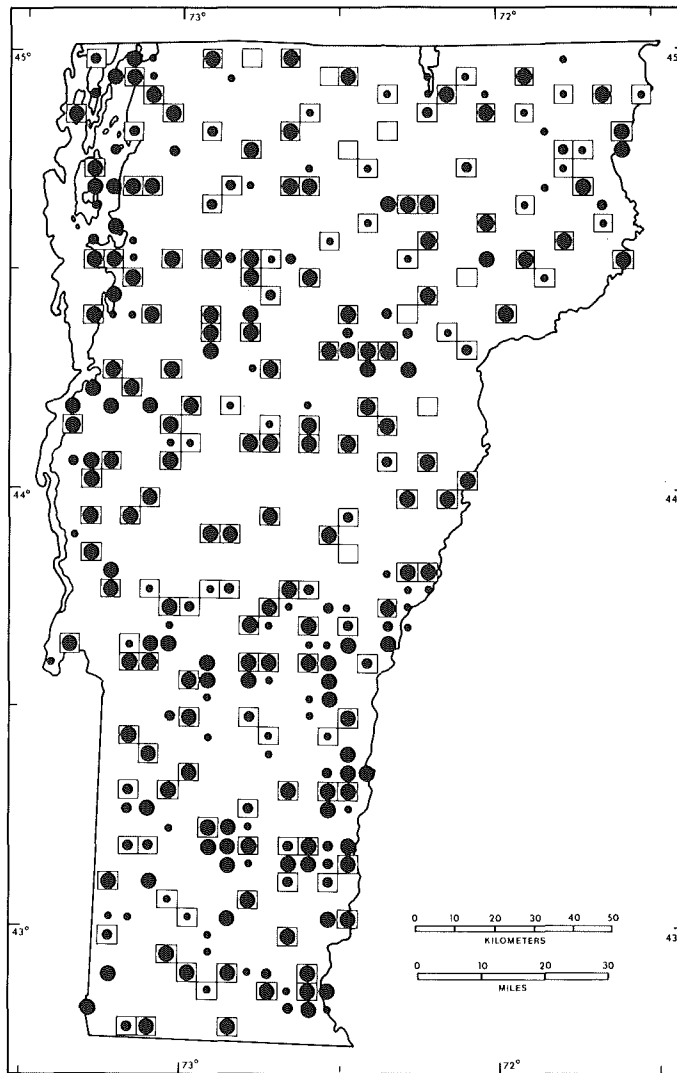
Nests are in cavities in dead trees or stubs of live trees. The Downy often nests in trees



of smaller diameter and at lower heights than Vermont's other woodpeckers (Conner et al. 1975). Cavities are excavated in trees having decayed heartwood as a result of fungal attack (Conner et al. 1975).

Breeding activities normally begin in March (in February if the weather is mild) with drumming and the establishment of territories (Kilham 1974). Female Downies initiate much of the breeding behavior (Lawrence 1967). Seven Vermont egg dates range from May 16 to June 2; there were 3 clutches of 4 eggs, 2 of 6 eggs, and 1 of 5 eggs. Bull (1974) reports 4 to 5 eggs for most New York clutches and egg dates of May 6 to June 31. Incubation lasts 12 days (Lawrence 1967) and is shared by both sexes; the male remains in the nest cavity at night (Kilham 1962). Vermont nestling dates range from May 28 to July 16 (11 dates). Young remain in the nest cavity 20 to 22 days, and fledglings are fed by the adults for up to 3 weeks following emergence (Lawrence 1967). Eighteen records of dependent young in Vermont range from June 12 to July 10.

Downy Woodpeckers eat insects and spiders found on and under bark, on branches and twigs, among clusters of newly opening leaves, and on fallen logs. They also eat resident larvae of plant galls (Schlichter 1978) and of dead corn stalks. They will occasionally flycatch in summer, and readily eat



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 171 (96%)

Possible breeding: 28 (16% of total)

Probable breeding: 27 (16% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 116 (68% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	30	97	18
Green Mountains	51	94	30
North Central	18	95	11
Northeast Highlands	16	100	9
East Central	17	89	10
Taconic Mountains	16	100	9
Eastern Foothills	23	96	13

fruits in fall and winter. Downies commonly visit feeding stations in winter. Segregation by sex occurs in foraging niches, as females tend to feed on large limbs and trunks at middle heights while males are prone to feed higher up on smaller limbs and twigs, and on or near the ground (Jackson 1970; Williams 1975). Downies will concentrate foraging efforts on tree species that harbor abundant insect prey such as elm bark beetles (Jackson 1970) or coccids (Kilham 1970). Interspecific competition with Hairy Woodpeckers during the nesting season may be partly reduced by slight differences in habitats (Hairy Woodpeckers are often

found in mature forests) and by differences in size classes of trees and limbs used for nesting and foraging (Kisiel 1972).

The Downy Woodpecker was confirmed as nesting in all seven physiographic regions, most often by observing fledged young. This woodpecker is well distributed in Vermont, occurring in 89% to 100% of the priority blocks within the physiographic regions.

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