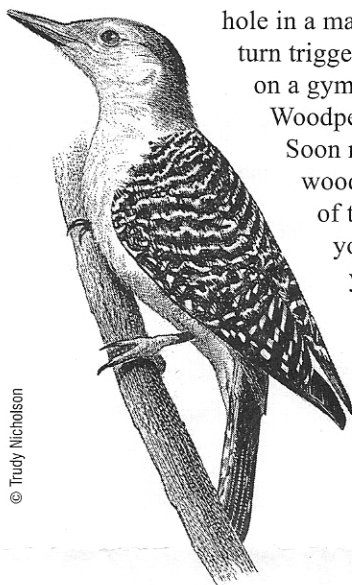


## Cabin John—Rich in Woodpeckers



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Red-bellied Woodpecker

The loud drumming of the Red-bellied Woodpecker in the backyard can wake the dead. That sound sets off the hysterical banter of the Pileated Woodpecker living in a nest hole in a maple up the block, which in turn triggers the squeak of “sneakers on a gym floor” that signifies a Hairy Woodpecker announcing his arrival. Soon my backyard is crowded with woodpeckers. And that’s only three of the five woodpecker species you may commonly see in your backyard, especially if you have a lot of big trees or a backyard feeder filled with nut-studded suet. Here comes the ubiquitous Downy Woodpecker, a pint-sized version of the Hairy, which can often be found in a roving phalanx of Carolina Chickadees, Tufted Titmice, and Carolina Wrens—what biologists call a mixed-species flock.

A solitary arrival scares off the Downy and his feeding companions, the robust Northern Flicker, the shiest of the quintet of common local woodpeckers.

Recent neurological studies show that sustained watching of birds has similar physiological effects as mindfulness practice, such as those of meditating Zen masters. So there is a potential healing benefit to the otherwise idle pastime of staring at your appropriately stocked bird feeder in winter. It’s also comforting in another way: the food provided by your birdfeeder or backyard plants and berries creates the fat that birds will need to fuel them through the periods when they would normally experience their highest mortality—the severe cold snaps lasting several days and exceptionally cold and windy winter nights. So while your food might extend their lives, it may well add health benefit and pleasure to yours.

Local residents, bird provisioners or not, often hear the refrain, “Oh, I love Cabin John. You are

so lucky to live there.” Sandwiched between the National Park that runs along the Potomac River and the dense upland forest along Cabin John Creek, Cabin John is surely a privileged location. It is made even more so by the presence of many tall, older trees; these trees in turn attract many birds. It may seem ludicrous to put a dollar value on how much living among such a diversity of woodpeckers increases property values in Cabin John, but for a naturalist, the comparative value is considerable. For those counting, five woodpecker species in the backyard is quite a haul for almost any place on Earth, but for the truly lucky who live along the Potomac in winter, it’s possible to see, or at least hear a sixth, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker in the woods. And those blessed souls who own large tracts along Persimmon Tree Road—especially forested land that abuts horse pastures studded with large oaks—they might be fortunate enough to spot a seventh species, the most beautiful local woodpecker of all—the now rare Red-headed Woodpecker. It’s preferred savanna-like habitat, farmland and pastures with trees and forest edge, has given way to subdivisions.

I once visited a ranch at the edge of the rainforest up the coast from Sao Paulo, Brazil, where a local man filled feeders with ripe bananas to attract birds. Within a few minutes we had counted 14 species of brightly colored tanagers. Similarly, in the mountains of Costa Rica I have seen a simple hummingbird feeder attract seven species of these nectar-fueled darts, each fighting for a place to drink. Considering that we live in less bird-rich forests than in coastal Brazil or the mountains of Costa Rica, five woodpeckers coming to your feeder looms even larger as a sense of how special Cabin John really is for birds.

Watching them now, I notice the woodpeckers in my backyard have no better manners than the Costa Rican hummingbirds—one flies in, the other bolts. This steady parade of woodpeckers and other birds in winter still brings out the simplest joy in us—being nature’s provider. Northern Flicker, I hope to see you tomorrow. —