Downy Woodpecker

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

The Downy Woodpecker is the smallest and best-known woodpecker in North America. It gets its name from the soft, downy feathers surrounding its bill. Like other woodpeckers, it has two toes facing forward and two facing backward – a trait that comes in handy for climbing and clinging.

Unlike larger woodpeckers, the Downy can drill a nest cavity in a tree or branch as small as 10 cm, which increases its habitat possibilities – and may help explain why they are so common. You can find this energetic bird flitting from tree trunk to tree trunk throughout the year in most of the United States.

Interesting Facts:

Family: Picidae

Scientific Name: *Picoides pubescens*

Location: Found throughout most of North America except in areas below tree line in the extreme Southwest, and in Hawaii. Habitat ranges from wilderness forests to urban backyards.

Migration: This non-migrating bird tends to join mixed flocks in the winter, when it can be seen foraging for food with chickadees and other species.

Nesting: In early spring, both the male and female make the nest cavity, which can take up to two weeks, by pecking a hole in a dead tree or wooden post. The female lays four to five white eggs, which are incubated by both parents for about twelve days. Chicks leave the nest when they are approximately three weeks old.

Diet: Their long, sticky tongues are useful for catching insects. Males feed on insects from the smaller branches toward the top of trees, while females feed on the larger branches and tree trunks. Males appear to keep females from foraging in the most fruitful spots of the tree. When the male moves, the female may shift her foraging to his vacated spot. Both sexes are known to frequent feeders for fruit, seed, and suet offerings.

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Size and Color:	Between 6"-7" long, the Downy is sometimes confused with the similar-looking but larger-billed Hairy Woodpecker. It has black and white plumage on the head and white-spotted black wings. It has a plain white back and underparts and a very small bill. Males have a red patch on the back of the head while females have a black patch.
Song:	A flat "pick-pick-pick-pick" call. A rapid whinny of notes, descending in pitch.
Attracting:	If safe to do so, leave your dead and dying trees intact to provide habitat for them to make cavity nests. They may also use a man-made nest box. Provide nut blocks and suet feeders.
Life Span:	4-11 years in the wild.

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