

American Three-toed Woodpecker



ILLUSTRATION BY ZACKERY ZINNAK

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Picoides dorsalis* comes from the Latin words *picus*, meaning “woodpecker,” and *dorsalis*, meaning “backed” (likely pertaining to the barred or partially barred back).

DESCRIPTION: Averaging 8.5 to 9 inches long, the American three-toed woodpecker is patterned in black and white. Its wings, rump and tail primarily are black, its outer tail feathers mostly white. Its head is black with a white stripe behind the eye and another across the lower cheek. The top of its head is speckled black and white, with males flaunting a central patch of yellow. The race in Arizona has a mostly white back with irregular black barring on the outer edge. Its underparts are grayish white with black barring on the sides. Where most woodpecker species have four toes on each foot, this woodpecker has only three toes.

DISTRIBUTION: American three-toed woodpeckers live throughout forested regions of Alaska and Canada, south

locally to northern New York, the Cascade Range and the Rocky Mountains and down to Arizona and New Mexico. In Arizona, these woodpeckers occur in higher elevations of the White Mountains, Mogollon Rim, San Francisco Peaks, Kaibab Plateau and the Chuska Mountains on the Navajo Indian Reservation.

HABITAT: In Arizona, American three-toed woodpeckers inhabit cooler coniferous forests from 7,300–11,000 feet in elevation, and locally down to 6,500 feet. They reach their highest abundance in forests dominated by Engelmann spruce, blue spruce and subalpine fir, but also regularly occur in adjacent mixed conifer forests of white fir, Douglas fir, limber pine, ponderosa pine and quaking aspen. They infrequently are detected in drier forests dominated by ponderosa pine.

BIOLOGY: These woodpeckers are quiet, retiring and easily overlooked, but once discovered are quite approachable, unlike most other woodpeckers. They methodically flake the bark from the lower main trunk of dead or dying conifer trees in a quest for their primary food, bark beetle larvae. Favorite trees eventually are denuded of bark, which collects in a large heap around the base of the trunk. Generally sparsely distributed in forests, these woodpeckers frequently move into a forest stand one or two years after it is ravaged by fire, disease or insects. Here they often nest in higher densities for several years, taking advantage of abundant food.

The breeding season is initiated in March, when males begin to drum on dead branches to establish territories and attract mates. They nest in a tree cavity the pair constructs 5–40 feet above the ground, typically in a snag or living conifer.

The average clutch of four eggs is laid beginning in April or May. Chicks hatch after 11–14 days and remain in the cavity until 22–26 days old. Adults may continue to feed the young for a month or two after they leave the cavity.

STATUS: Although trend information is unknown in Arizona, American three-toed woodpecker populations appear stable. No apparent loss in distribution was noted during the statewide Arizona Breeding Bird Atlas project (1993–2000). However, local forestry practices use salvage logging (cutting of burned trees) and fire-suppression logging (cutting of insect-infested or diseased trees), which reduce or remove the dead and dying trees on which this species depends.

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MANAGEMENT NEEDS: The Arizona Partners in Flight Bird Conservation Plan includes this woodpecker as a priority species. Forest management policies that limit logging of trees killed by fires, insects or disease would limit the greatest threats: habitat loss and alteration. Very few Arizona studies have focused on this unique woodpecker and even basic natural history information is needed. 🦉

■ As the avian monitoring coordinator for the Arizona Game and Fish Department, Troy Corman works with many agencies, organizations and volunteers to coordinate efforts in collecting data to track population trends of Arizona’s birds.