Gilded Flicker

Scientific Name: *Colaptes chrysoides* comes from the Greek word *kolaptes*, "a chiseller" (someone who picks away at something; e.g., a woodpecker). *Chrysoides* comes from the Greek root *khrusoides*, which means "resembling gold" or "golden." The common name "gilded" refers to the golden coloration on the underside of the bird's wings and tail. "Flicker" is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word *flicerian* — "the fluttering of birds."

Description: Arizona's largest woodpecker has striking plumage: golden underwings and tail and a flashy white rump that's readily seen in flight. Its body generally is brownish, with black spotting on the belly and black bars on the back. It has a gray face and brown crown. A large, black, somewhat oval-shaped patch covers the breast, and a red "mustache" adorns the male. Gilded flickers measure about 11 inches long and weigh 3.2–4.6 ounces, with an 18-inch average wingspan. As with other flickers, females appear slightly smaller than males.

In the 1960s this species was included as one of several subspecies of the Northern flicker. The limited interbreeding observed between gilded and Northern flickers led to the splitting of the species in 1995, although the birds look very similar. The gilded's call is a loud "keew," and its courtship call consists of an extended series of high-pitched "wikwikwikwik."

Distribution: The gilded flicker is nonmigratory throughout its fairly limited range, which extends from the extreme southeastern corner of California and southern Arizona south to northwest Mexico (including most of Baja California, western Sonora and the tip of northwestern Sinaloa). Arizona contains more than 90 percent of the U.S. population, which is centered in the southwestern portion of the state and extends as far east as the San Pedro and upper Gila rivers. Closely tied to its preferred habitat, it is encountered at elevations of 200–3,200 feet, although some local populations may occupy higher sites (4,600 feet).

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Illustration by Zackery Zdinak

Habitat: A keystone species of the Sonoran Desert, the gilded flicker reaches its highest numbers in upland areas where the majestic saguaro forests are most dense. A strong affinity for the saguaro cactus limits distribution in Arizona primarily to Sonoran Desert uplands, and secondarily, to the less-vegetated desert lowlands. Adjacent riparian woodlands are used more sparingly. In these zones, the gilded interbreeds with the northern flicker. The gilded flicker also infrequently occupies Mojave desertscrub and semiarid grasslands. Gildeds shy away from agricultural lands and most highly developed urban areas, even where saguaros are present.

Biology: Gilded flickers eat ants and, to a lesser degree, other insects. Fruits and seeds also are part of their diet (more so in the winter). These flickers often forage on the ground, using their long, sticky tongue to entrap ants. For nesting, these flickers greatly prefer to excavate cavities in giant saguaros, which may take more than three months. A mated pair excavates the nest cavity collaboratively, generally at a height of 15–20 feet. Egg laying begins in early to mid-March, with peak nesting activity in mid-April to mid-May. Typically three to five eggs are laid, then incubated by both sexes for 11 days. Upon hatching, feeding is provided by both parents. Young leave the nest cavity when 21–27 days old. Once flickers have left the saguaro cavity, numerous other desert inhabitants (including owls and flycatchers) rely on these abandoned cavities for roosting and nesting.

Status: Gradual loss of Sonoran Desert habitat to urbanization and agriculture has reduced this flicker's range. Additionally, destruction of saguaro cacti by wildfires (driven by exotic grasses and other annuals) eliminates key nesting habitat, which also may impact population numbers.

Management Needs: Gilded flickers are tied closely to the Sonoran Desert for nesting and foraging habitat; therefore, maintaining the desert's emblematic saguaro forests is essential. Gilded flickers have been studied less than Northern flickers, and significant information on their natural history is lacking.

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