

Nature Notes

Williamson's Sapsucker



The Williamson Sapsucker (WISA) is a red listed bird that has in past years nested in the Kimberley Nature Park (KNP). Prior to a WISA nest found in the KNP in 2001, no nesting site had been known in the East Kootenay for over 50 years.

One of the interesting features of these birds is the major difference between the male and female. The male has a black back, white rump and a large obvious white wing patch. His head is black with narrow white stripes, a bright red throat and chin and a yellow belly. The female looks very similar to a flicker with her barred dark brown and white back, wings and sides and her brown head.

Woodpeckers and sapsuckers are often identified by their drumming pattern which calls for careful listening. The WISA arrives in our area as early as mid March to mid April and soon sets about establishing a territory. Their drumming pattern, which is used to attract a mate or declare a territory, starts slow, speeds up then ends with two or three very slow beats.



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The WISA prefers to nest in large Western Larch trees that have a dead top or some other some other kind of decay. In the spring they drill sapwells in young Douglas Fir and the sap produced is their main source of food at this time. The sapwells are small



Female WISA

photo by P. Davidson

holes usually in a neat horizontal row, often with several rows in one tree. The sapwells are inside their nesting territory. Ants are another food source and are what their babies are fed. Once the eggs, usually 4 to 6, are laid, drumming is infrequent. Drumming decreases even more once the young are being fed so the only way to tell if birds are in the area is by seeing the adults flying back and forth to the nest tree.

The other sapsucker that nests in the KNP is the Red-naped Sapsucker. Both male and female of this species have a red patch on the top and the back of their heads plus a red throat. This bird is much more common and is generally found in or around aspen trees.

Woodpeckers and sapsuckers tend to be habitat specialists and as such they are more at risk of extinction when their habitat is threatened.