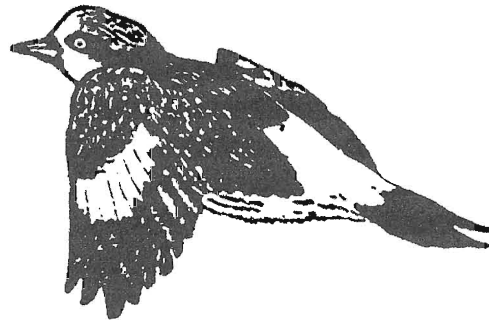


## Acorn Woodpecker

*Melanerpes formicivorus*

("Black-creeper ant-eating")



The Acorn Woodpecker is one of ten woodpeckers that call California home. It is a robin-sized bird, with predominantly black and white feathers. The back, tail, and wings are black, with a large white patch on each wing, and a white rump. It also has a yellow throat, red cap on its head, white cheeks, and black around its eyes and beak. The male has a white forehead, the forehead of the female is black. Both males and females have yellow eyes, which is a good field mark, since the only other California woodpecker with light-colored eyes is the Pileated, a much larger, uncommon bird, whose range has little overlap with that of the Acorn Woodpecker.

The white patches on the wings are easily seen when the bird is flying, and are another sure sign that the bird is an Acorn Woodpecker, for it is the only lowland woodpecker that shows such wingpatches.

This bird is very vocal, with a call that has variously been described as "wick-up, wick-up", "whack-up, whack-up", "wake-up, wake-up", "jay-cup, jay-cup", or "ja-cob, ja-cob". Another way that woodpeckers communicate is by "drumming" on trees, creating a sound reminiscent of a miniature jackhammer. This drumming is not the sound made when drilling into trees looking for food or excavating a nest, as is often thought. That tapping sound is much slower and more deliberate, more like a regular hammer.

Acorn Woodpeckers eat a variety of things. An important part of their diet is insects. They drill boring insects out of the wood of trees, pick crawling insects off the bark, or catch flying insects by "hawking" (flying out from and returning to the same perch). They also eat tree sap, fruit, corn, nuts, and, of course, acorns. It is their storage method of the latter that is at the heart of two behaviors unique to this woodpecker.



The first of these behaviors is the establishment and defense of one or two large granaries, where up to 20,000 acorns (some sources give 50,000) may be stored. These granaries consist of a dead tree, or perhaps a live tree, a post, a telephone pole, or the side of a wooden cabin, where the woodpeckers drill holes, then hammer an acorn into each one. These holes are a very tight fit, and if an acorn shrinks during storage and becomes loose, the birds will move it to a smaller hole. Squirrels, other Acorn Woodpeckers, and other birds that try to steal the nuts are attacked and driven away. The stored nuts, and any insects that may have infested them, serve as a back up food supply in times when other food sources are scarce. If almonds, walnuts, or pecans are available, they also will be stored.

The maintenance and defense of granaries and the territory surrounding them requires a great deal of energy. This apparently explains the other unique behavior these birds exhibit -- communal breeding. This is where several birds assist in the care of the brood of one pair of birds, and is a very uncommon behavior. Acorn Woodpeckers in California live in family groups of up to 15 related members, with 7 to 8 apparently the optimum size. These groups consist of a breeding pair and their previous season's young, (and sometimes cousins of the younger birds). All of the birds help incubate the eggs and raise the current season's young, as well as to defend the granary and the territory surrounding it.

The nest is a cavity, usually excavated in a dead tree, usually about 20-25 feet from the ground, and lined with wood chips. It may be used for several years. There is rarely more than one brood per year. Eggs are laid starting in late April. They are white, about 1" long, and usually number from 3 to 7. The eggs hatch 11-12 days after being laid, and the young fledge at 30-32 days. They are independent at 2 months, but, as noted above, usually stay with their parents for at least one season to help raise their younger brothers and sisters. The non-native European Starlings will steal the nest cavity if they can, evicting the residents, and are attacked aggressively if the Acorn Woodpeckers see them entering their home territory.

These birds are common in the oak and pine-oak woodlands of the lower altitudes of western Oregon south to southern Baja California. Their range extends from the coast eastward to the western foothills of the Cascades and Sierra Nevada. Farther south they range into northern Arizona and New Mexico and western Texas and from there south through appropriate habitat to Columbia in South America. They require oak trees to provide them with acorns and large snags (dead trees) to provide sites for nesting and granaries.

Like all woodpeckers, Acorn Woodpeckers have specially evolved, thick skulls, with extra cushioning for the brain. They have short, strong legs and sharp claws for clinging to the bark of trees. Their tail feathers are short and stiff and serve as a prop for the birds as they climb up the trunks of trees and help brace the birds while they are hammering. Special bristly feathers protect their nostrils, probably to keep wood dust out. And, like all woodpeckers, they have extra long tongues. It is attached to the skull behind the nostrils, wraps over the top of the skull, then through the throat into the mouth. This long tongue has a barbed tip and is coated with sticky saliva, both of which help the woodpecker extract insects from holes they have bored into trees and to lap up ants from the bark.