

## Hairies and Downies

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It's autumn. The mockernuts have turned yellow, the oaks have turned brown, the monarchs have passed, the sharp-shins are flying, and once again I am trying to explain the difference between downy woodpeckers and hairy woodpeckers to incredulous undergraduates. Why do I do this?

Watching birds is of course great fun. Watching woodpeckers in autumn can be glorious. The trees' dark branches are etched into the azure sky -- the perfect complement for the blacks and whites and occasional reds of a woodpecker's plumage. Humans naturally like some sport, and for some of us the sport of choice is identifying birds.

Perhaps that is the point of knowing a downy from a hairy. Separating these two woodpeckers is the first skill any aspiring birder in eastern North America must master. It's like getting the ball over the net but not out of bounds or holding a ball so it spirals when you throw it. Before you achieve anything else you have to figure out how to tell

whether or not the black-and-white woodpecker alone at the top of an autumn tree is a hairy.

This presumption that identifying birds is a sport creates some problems for me. After all I am supposed to be teaching something serious and useful, something that can improve prospects for employment or, if that fails, at least appreciation of the human condition. So why spend time on hairy and downy woodpeckers? Why not a solution to some problem that imperils the future of society? Why not some signal intellectual accomplishment of past generations? I mean, for heaven's sake, hairy woodpeckers -- what kind of a name for a bird is that?

So perhaps my teaching should be transferred to the athletic department. Why not intercollegiate birding? It surely could promote physical as well as mental development among our students. No doubt it would put the question of identifying hairy and downy woodpeckers in a whole new light! Some of my well-meaning friends probably feel that such sport belongs, if not in the athletic department, at least not in a biology department. Nevertheless, thankful for tenure, each autumn I persist in this task. There is something important, I sense, about knowing how to tell a hairy woodpecker from a downy.

My problem is it is second-nature for me. I wasn't 15 years old before I could tell these

two birds apart. Nowadays the whinny of a downy woodpecker on a crisp afternoon invites me to seek the diminutive source. Often it is chipping away industriously with its stubby beak near the tip of a slender branch along the edge of the woods. All around chickadees and titmice are boisterously spilling from tree to tree. The little downy seems so serious in such company.

The ringing rattle of a hairy, on the other hand, can fill the interstices of a great forest. It summons respect for its disproportionate beak and unrivaled tongue, both designed to handle the trunks of the hardest trees.

Students like to learn about a woodpecker's tongue, a structure so long that it is housed in a special sheath wrapping around the skull to the top of the head. The hardened tip is armed with reversed barbs. With this harpoon-like structure a grub can be speared and then pulled into the open.

The hairy outdoes all of our other woodpeckers in the tongue department. The sheath for its tongue runs right over the top of its head and wraps around its right eye. The hairy woodpecker can handle the challenges of the biggest forests, with the biggest trees and the deepest grubs.

None of this information makes a hairy any easier to tell from a downy. It takes dissection to compare the tongues. The preposterous name of the bird is certainly no help. In the 1710's the pioneering naturalist, Mark Catesby, coined the name "hairy" in reference to the feathers on the back. This neologism, however, is a stretcher, to say the least; the feathers in question are perhaps a bit longer than any other similar bird's but hardly qualify as hairy. It was Linnaeus a few decades later who supplied Latin names for the two birds, and he coined "pubescens" for the smaller species. He too was obviously clutching at straws, as there is nothing especially pubescent, or downy, about this bird.

The larger size of the hairy is not much help in identification either, except in the fortunate chance of a side-by-side comparison. Furthermore, the obvious aspects of coloration provide no help at all. Both species have the same pattern on the head, the same stripe of white down the back, and the same white spots on the feathers of the wings. None of these points is a field mark, the thing you must see to make sure you are not looking at something else -- the differential diagnosis, if you wish.

There are just two field marks for separating downy and hairy. There is the size of the hairy's beak, not just absolutely but also proportionately larger than the downy's, and there are the pure white feathers on the sides of the hairy's tail, devoid of the small black

marks on these feathers of the downy. Their voices are different too. The downy's whinny drops in pitch at the end. The hairy's rattle and even its single loud "peek" are altogether more strident, penetrating sounds.

For the neophyte undergraduate, my ability to name these woodpeckers at a glance or from a single "peek" seems miraculous. "What good eyes you have!". "What good ears you have!". In truth, I just know what to look and listen for. It just takes practice.

Think what the world is like when you can hear the voice of a hairy woodpecker. That commanding rattle means a lot. It is the voice of a forest in its maturity. Hairies, not downies, are specialists on big trees. They do not long inhabit places easily visited by humans. Hairies are specialists on a primeval America. They tell us there is grandeur nearby. They tell us there is solitude nearby. You cannot hear its message if you cannot hear the voice of a hairy woodpecker.

Is it important to hear this voice? It could, after all, disappear from places where it now reverberates among great oaks and hickories. If it vanished without anyone hearing it, would it ever have been there at all? If no one knows what to listen for, will the hairy ever have spoken? Will the forest it spoke for ever have existed? I strive to help my students to hear the hairy woodpecker because it is important to listen to that voice. It is

not too early, nor yet too late, to learn this skill.

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