



Birds of the Bahamian Pine Forest



Artwork by John Thompson

HAIRY WOODPECKER

SCIENTIFIC NAME

Picoides villosus

COMMON NAME

Spanish Woodpecker, Sook

DESCRIPTION

The Hairy Woodpecker is a mostly black and white bird that is approximately 8 – 9 inches in length. The male has a red patch on the back of the head, with black upperparts and white underparts. The head has a black eyeline and mustache stripe on an otherwise white face. The sub-species on Abaco and Grand Bahama has black spots on the tail feathers; otherwise the outer tail feathers are white and unbarred. The female looks like the male but lacks a red head patch.

DIET

Woodpeckers play a special role in the food chain. They drill into trees to uncover insect food, to create nesting shelters and to communicate with other woodpeckers. While they do punch holes in trees, these trees are rarely healthy ones. By stripping the bark from dead or dying trees and cleaning up the resident wood borers or carpenter ants, they prevent these pests from spreading to nearby healthy trees. Woodpeckers feed mainly on wood-boring grubs, insects, insect eggs and pupae. They also consume sap, nuts, and the fruit of some trees and shrubs.

The Hairy Woodpecker has a number of body adaptations, which make it ideally suited for its unique place in the food chain. It has a sharp stout bill with a chisel-like tip for

chipping and digging into tree trunks and branches. Bones between the beak and the unusually thick skull are not as rigidly joined as they are in other birds. Spongy, shock-absorbing tissues connect these flexible joints; strong neck muscles provide force for drilling and bristly feathers shield the nostrils from dust and wood chips. The tip of the woodpecker's tongue is pointed and barbed. It is nearly twice as long as the woodpecker's head and winds around the inside back of the skull when retracted. After a hole is bored, the long flexible tongue feels out, impales and withdraws the larvae. To grip trees, a woodpecker has short muscular legs and sharply clawed feet. Stiff pointed tailfeathers catch on the rough bark to brace the hammering body.

REPRODUCTION

After pair formation Hairy Woodpeckers nest in a dead tree cavity, sometimes in a palm. They lay 3 - 4 white (unmarked) eggs in the bottom of the cavity. Both sexes incubate the eggs with the more aggressive male staying on the eggs overnight. Young are altricial (featherless and blind). For two or three weeks, they remain in the nest and are fed pre-digested food by their parents. Hairy Woodpeckers breed from March to July.

HABITAT, RANGE AND STATUS

Hairy Woodpeckers are found mainly in Pine Forests, but they may forage in other woodlands. They are a fairly common year-round resident on the pine-forested northern islands of The Bahamas: Andros, Grand Bahama, Abaco and New Providence. This is the only species of woodpecker found on New Providence during the six warmer months. It occurs throughout North and Central America and is a vagrant on Puerto Rico (Mona Island).

INTERESTING FACTS

- Hairy Woodpeckers are shy and are usually found in pairs.
- Two endemic sub-species inhabit The Bahamas: *Picoides villosus piger* on Grand Bahama and Abaco and *Picoides villosus maynardi* on New Providence and Andros. Both of these sub-species are among the smallest races of Hairy Woodpecker.