

Ladder-backed Woodpecker

The Ladder-backed Woodpecker is among the more common Hill Country birds, yet this diminutive woodpecker lives with little fanfare and attention. You are more likely to hear the male's "whinny" cry as he and his mate search for beetle larvae in dead or infected trees before you see him. Their call note is a sharp "pik."

Birders can often rely on the name of a bird to have a good clue in helping to identify him. In this case the bars, or horizontal lines, on the Ladder-backed Woodpecker's back are in fact an excellent help, but as is often the case, the bars are not an exclusive trait to the Ladder-backed Woodpecker. The other common Hill Country woodpecker, the Golden-fronted Woodpecker, also has a ladder-plumage on its back. The Red-headed Woodpecker is another example of possible confusion in bird names and possible description; almost every male species of North American woodpeckers has some red on their heads.

Apart from their common ladder-plumage, goldenfronts and ladderbacks have little else in similarity relevant to plumage. The male ladderbacks sport red crowns, while their mates lack any red in their plumage. Ladderback males also have buffy breasts and flanks compared to the females' white plumage. Both genders have spots on their wings and spots and streaks on their breasts. Both also have black "U" shaped patterns on their faces with the open end towards their beaks. Goldenfronts are larger and have clear white breasts; males have only a small red cap and yellow napes and lores.

Ladder-backed Woodpeckers are at home in the dry brush country of the desert Southwest, preferring mesquite and prickly pear to more traditional woodpecker habitats in hardwood woodlands; however, they also occur in woodlands in their Texas range which encompasses the western three-fourths of the state. I frequently see them in the desert habitats where lechuguilla, sotol and agave stalks provide them "tree trunks" on which to practice their excavation skills.

More on next page!!! Don't know why it wouldn't move up.

Like most woodpeckers they are experts in building cavity homes, not only for themselves but for smaller birds that share their preferred habitats. Here in the Hill Country, Ladder-backed Woodpeckers might be considered home builders for titmice, chickadees, and wrens. Out in the Big Bend Country the ladderback clientele may include wrens, elf owls and titmice. Entry-hole size is the most important feature considered by prospective tenants.

Where trees are available, these woodpeckers look for ants and beetle larvae as an important part of their diets. The males excavate for their meals, while the females glean insects from the bark. Females tend to feed higher in the canopies than do males where insects might be more common in the bark; males hunt for grubs in the dead wood occurring lower in the canopy. These woodpeckers supplement their diets with fruits and berries. I frequently see them feed on my suet logs in the winter.

Like several of their woodpecker brethren the ladderbacks have an undulating flight pattern which consists of a series of rapid wing beats followed by rest periods when they lose altitude. The resulting up and down flight movement is easy to spot while they are airborne. They share this flight style with goldfinches and siskins.

Fortunately Ladder-backed Woodpeckers are not as mischievous as their relative Golden-fronted Woodpeckers. The latter do not make many friends with fruit growers and electric power companies as they damage fruit and perforate power line poles. Ladderbacks are smaller and tend to be quiet neighbors until they belt out a few “whinnys” as they work their way through your back yards. If they didn’t sound off, you might miss them while they are traveling through your neighborhoods.

Bill Lindemann, Fredericksburg, TX

Go outside & play!

