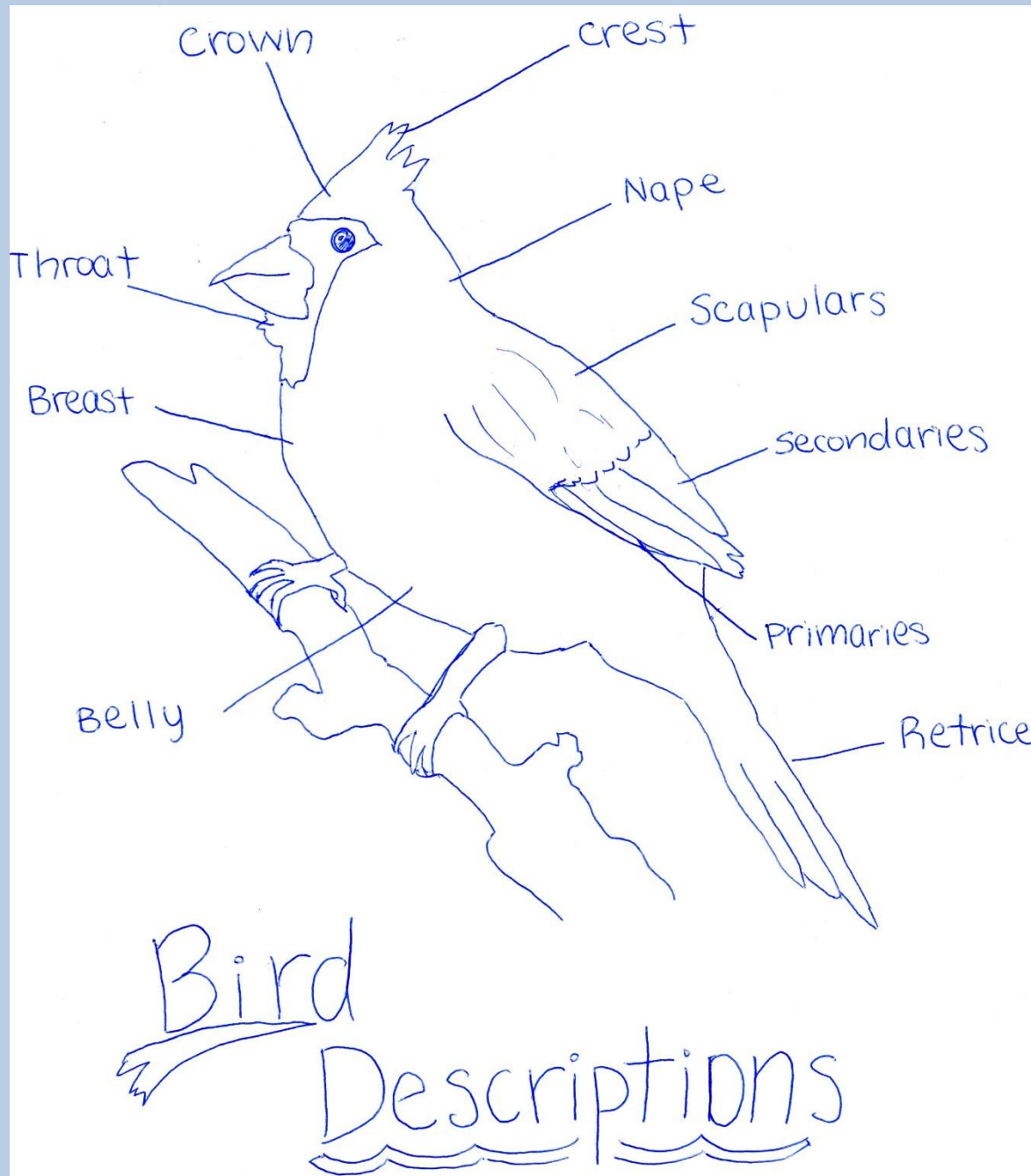


# Common Birds at the Environmental Learning Center

- Jump to:
  - **Raptors** – capture and kill prey with talons
    - Bald Eagle
    - Great Horned Owl
    - Red-tailed Hawk
    - Swainson's Hawk
  - **Perching Birds** – have three toes in front, one in back
    - American Gold Finch
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    - House Finch
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  - **Water Birds**
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  - **Woodpeckers**
    - Downy Woodpecker
    - Northern Flicker

**Use this diagram as a reference when using this guide and to help you describe birds just like an ornithologist!**



*Created by Hannah Dresang, 2018*

## Key Terms Key:

**Foragers** – an animal that actively searches for food

**Migration** – a patterned cycle of departure to and from breeding grounds

**Molt** – the replacement of worn, or juvenile feathers for new, mature ones

**Nocturnal** – primarily active at night

**Opportunistic feeders** – unlike specialist feeders, these animals have a diverse diet and aren't considered picky eaters

**Plumage** – bird feathers; often used to describe patterns and coloration

**Undulating flight** – a flying strategy made up of active flapping with periods of passive gliding

# ELC Raptors

## Bald Eagle

- **Description**
  - Distinct, curved beak
  - Dark brown body and wings that stretch 8ft
  - White head and tail
- **Habitat**
  - Breeds in forested areas near large bodies of water. Winters in coastal areas, along large rivers, and large unfrozen lakes.
- **Food**
  - Opportunistic feeder
  - Prefers fish
  - Also eat large birds, mammals, and carrion
- **Behavior**
  - Breeds near water from Alaska throughout Canada and in scattered localities in nearly all of the United States in the summer
  - A small number also inhabit Mexico
  - Winters in coastal Alaska and Canada, and throughout lower 48 states
- **Fun Fact**
  - Bald Eagles occasionally hunt cooperatively, with one individual flushing prey toward another



# Great Horned Owl

- **Description**
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> largest species of owl in North American
  - 43-54 cm in height with 91-153 cm wingspan
  - Generally weigh 1.3-5.7 lbs.
  - Dark brown tinged, gives the appearance of bars of stripes on the body
  - Distinctive amber colored eyes and large ear tufts on top of head, which are dark brown in color
- **Food**
  - Carnivorous, diet consists mainly of small mammals including mice, ground squirrels, rats, pocket gophers, juvenile raccoons and rabbits
- **Behavior**
  - Nocturnal; excellent night hunters given their binocular vision which allows them to see prey in low light conditions
  - Swallows prey whole, however it cannot digest bones or fur, so these are coughed up in the form of an owl pellet the next day
  - Breed in late January to early February and produce 1-6 eggs, depending on environmental conditions
  - Do not build their own nests, instead taking over the nests of large birds or squirrels
- **Habitat**
  - Can be found all over North American in almost any terrain
- **Fun Facts**
  - Have 300 psi of crushing power in their talons
  - Can rotate head 270 degrees in order to spot prey
  - Adults have no natural predators
- **Fun at the ELC!**
  - Look for signs of GHOs around the ELC, including nests and pellets. Then discuss owl adaptations with a companion!





## Red-tailed Hawk

- **Description**
  - Named for the red coloration on the top of the tail
  - Dusky brown upperparts
  - White breast
- **Habitat**
  - Found in open areas with scattered elevated perches, including agricultural areas, fields, pasture, parkland, broken woodland, and scrub desert
- **Food**
  - Small and medium-sized mammals, birds, reptiles.
- **Behavior**
  - Breeds from Alaska to Labrador, southward to Mexico and the Caribbean, down to Panama in summer
  - Winters from southern Canada and into Latin America
- **Fun Fact**
  - The raspy cry of the Red-tailed Hawk is often used in movies to represent any eagle or hawk call



## Swainson's Hawk

- **Description**
  - Short-tailed hawk
  - Vary in coloration, from a greyish-black, to a brownish-red
  - Most distinguishing feature is the broad white stripe under their wings
- **Habitat**
  - Most commonly found in open spaces, such as grasslands and agricultural fields. They often perch on top of utility poles and fence posts
  - Nest in isolated trees away from dense stands
- **Food**
  - Grab rodents while flying
  - Insects, including grasshoppers and dragonflies
  - Reptiles, especially during the breeding season
- **Behavior**
  - Migrate in flocks largely to Argentina (also Central America) for the winter
  - Social hawk found in flocks even outside of the breeding season
- **Fun Fact**
  - Flocks of Swainson's Hawks are called kettles. Kettles can include tens of thousands of birds, often combining with other raptors like Turkey Vultures





# ELC Perching Birds

## American Gold Finch

- **Description**
  - Males are a bright yellow with black wings and a black supercilium
- **Habitat**
  - Breeds in weedy fields, roadsides, orchards, and gardens. Winters in weedy, open areas, and moves into urban and suburban areas to eat at feeders
- **Food**
  - Seeds, especially of composite flowers
  - Few insects
- **Behavior**
  - Breeds across continent from central Canada southward to northern Nevada, Oklahoma, and central Georgia
  - Winters from Canadian border southward to southern United States and into Mexico
- **Fun Fact**
  - The American Goldfinch changes from winter plumage to breeding plumage by a complete molt of its body feathers. It is the only member of its family to have this second molt in the spring; all the other species have just one molt each year in the fall





## American Robin

- **Description**
  - 23-28 cm long
  - Avg. weight is about 77g
  - Brown and reddish-orange breast, white throat with black streaks and brown body
  - Male and female are very similar, but female is duller in color
- **Food**
  - 40% of diet is earthworms, beetle grubs, caterpillars, and grasshoppers and 60% is berries or fruit
  - Earthworms are important during the breeding season, but fruit is the main diet in winter. Robins eat different types of food depending on the time of day as well; they eat earthworms early in the day and more fruit later in the day.
- **Behavior**
  - Flock together to roost in mornings and evenings. Flock breaks up during the day
  - During summer (breeding season) robins are far less social than other times of the year
- **Habitat**
  - Breeds through most of North America, from Alaska and northern Canada southward to northern Florida and Mexico
  - Most individuals migrate south to Florida, Mexico or the Gulf Coast in winter
  - Found in woodlands, farmland and urban areas. Especially common where short-grass areas are interspersed with shrubs and trees
- **Fun Fact**
  - Eats fermented Pyracantha berries and afterwards will exhibit intoxicated behavior such as falling over while walking



## Black-capped Chickadee

- **Description**
  - Black cap and throat, with accented white eye band and throat
  - Grey wings over rose-brown belly
- **Habitat**
  - Deciduous and mixed deciduous/coniferous woodlands, open woods and parks, willow thickets, and cottonwood groves
  - Also found in old fields and suburban areas
  - Most numerous at forest edges.
- **Food**
  - Insects, especially small caterpillars. Also consume spiders, snails, slugs, and centipedes
  - Some berries and seeds during winter months
- **Behavior**
  - Migrates across the southern two-thirds of Canada and the northern two-thirds of the United States, and further south in the mountains during the summer
  - In some winters, individuals can be found further south
- **Fun Fact**
  - The Black-Capped Chickadee hides seeds and other food items for later recovery. Each item is placed in a different spot and a bird can remember thousands of hiding places



# Blue Jay

- **Description**
  - Dusty-blue crest, crown and nape
  - Black, slender mask accents white face
  - Vibrant, blue wing and tail feathers with black horizontal stripes and white tips
- **Habitat**
  - Found in deciduous, coniferous, and mixed forests and woodlands
  - Found more along forest edges than in deep forest
  - Common in urban and suburban areas, especially where large oaks are present
- **Food**
  - Arthropods, acorns and nuts, fruits, seeds, small vertebrates
- **Behavior**
  - Resident from southern Canada through eastern United States to Gulf Coast, westward to central Texas
  - Partially migratory: some birds migrate out of northern portion of range, but some jays remain in all parts of range during the winter
- **Fun Fact**
  - The Blue Jay frequently mimics the calls of hawks, especially the Red-shouldered Hawk. It has been suggested that these calls provide information to other jays that a hawk is around, or that they are used to deceive other species into believing a hawk is present





## European Starling

- **Description**
  - Iridescent black head, throat and breast with white speckles
  - Wings typically dark grey with iridescent blue accents
- **Habitat**
  - Uses a variety of habitats with open country, fields, and trees for nesting; especially near people in agricultural and urban areas.
- **Food**
  - Broad diet of many kinds of invertebrates, fruits, grains, seeds, and garbage
- **Behavior**
  - From eastern Alaska through all of Canada and the United States down into parts of Mexico and the Caribbean
- **Fun Fact**
  - All the European Starlings in North America descended from 100 birds released in New York's Central Park in the early 1890s. A group dedicated to introducing America to all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare's works set the birds free





# House Finch

- **Description**
  - Bright red crown and throat on male
  - Dusky brown primaries and secondaries with red accents
- **Habitat**
  - In the Eastern US, found almost exclusively in urban and suburban habitats, especially in areas with buildings, lawn, and small conifers
  - In the Western US, found around people, but also in desert, chaparral, oak savanna, riparian areas, and open coniferous forests
- **Food**
  - Buds, seeds and fruits
- **Behavior**
  - Migrate south from small parts of southern Canada through Mexico
- **Fun Fact**
  - The red or yellow color of a male House Finch comes from pigments that it gets in its food during molt. The more pigment in the food, the redder the male
  - Females prefer to mate with the reddest male they can find, perhaps assuring that they get a capable male who can find enough food to feed the nestlings



## Red-winged Blackbird

- **Description**
  - Stocky and broad shouldered. Hump-backed silhouette when perched
  - Male: Black with red and yellow patches on shoulders. Warm brown feathers in winter
  - Females: Dark brown with streaked brown and white color on body
  - Dense streaks and paler color on breast and face. Peach color on chin and throat
  - Both have about 12-15in wingspan
  - About 7-9in in length
- **Habitat**
  - Breeding season: Fresh and saltwater marshes, watercourses, dry meadows, open patches in woodlands and fields
  - Fall and winter: Crop fields and pastures, grasslands
- **Food**
  - Insects in the summer
  - Seeds in fall and winter (includes but not limited to corn, wheat, ragweed, cocklebur, sunflowers)
- **Behavior**
  - Very flamboyant, loud birds
  - Males perch on higher branches, females tend to fly low
  - Nest in groups. Up to 5 females building nests in each male's territory
  - Strong flyers
- **Fun Facts**
  - One of the most abundant native birds on the continent
  - Different populations and subspecies will vary in size and color. An experiment found that chicks grew up to resemble foster parents. This shows that they will vary on environment rather than genetics



## Western Meadowlark

- **Description**
  - Bright yellow throat and belly
  - Black malar stripe that crosses breast in a v-shape
  - Short tail, similar size to an American Robin
- **Habitat**
  - Grasslands, pastures, meadows and near marshes
- **Food**
  - Seeds and insects
- **Behavior**
  - Ground foragers and nesters. May forage in flocks during the winter
  - Using feeding mechanism called “gaping,” which means their bill easily creates holes to better reach food other birds would not be able to get to
  - Often heard rather than seen outside of breeding season
- **Fun Fact**
  - The Western Meadowlark is the state bird of six western states





## White-breasted Nuthatch

- **Description**
  - White head and throat with the exception of a grey crown that extends to nape and down wing and tail feathers
  - Cream-colored chest and belly
  - Long, narrow, pointed beak
- **Habitat**
  - Woodland forests, especially deciduous areas
  - Found throughout North America year round
- **Food**
  - Large seeds and insects
- **Behavior**
  - Will turn upside down on tree trunks when searching for insects
  - Do not migrate
- **Fun Fact**
  - Nuthatches are named for the way they hold seeds and whack them open with their beaks





# ELC Water Birds

## American White Pelican

- **Description**
  - White body 50-70 inches long with black tipped wings
  - 11.3-15.2 inch beak
- **Habitat**
  - Breeds in North America, migrates to Central and South America
- **Food**
  - Does not dive for food, instead it swims
  - Diet consists mostly of fish, also eats crayfish and amphibians
  - Feed in groups of about a dozen and work together to round up fish towards each other
- **Behavior**
  - Colonial breeders – nest with up to 5,000 pairs per site
  - March –April: Birds arrive at nest site
  - April-June: Nesting begins. Nest building and courtship take 1 week
  - They lay 2-3 eggs
  - Eggs incubate for 1 month
  - After 3-4 weeks the young leave the nest
  - As such a large bird, they have few natural predators
- **Fun Facts**
  - Populations were threatened when DDT was in use, but stricter environmental legislation has helped them recover
  - They sometimes engage in kleptoparasitism (stealing food from other birds)
  - Pelicans will coordinate hunting parties to drive schooling fish to shallow water
  - Live for more than 16 years in the wild



## Belted Kingfisher

- **Description**
  - The Belted Kingfisher is the North American type of Kingfisher
  - A medium sized bird that is 11-14 inches in length and has a wingspan of 19-23 inches
  - Have a tuft of feathers on top of the head with a long black/grey bill
  - The wings are a slate blue with flack feather tips with a white underbelly
- **Food**
  - Mostly eat fish but will also consume amphibians, small crustaceans, insects and small mammals and reptiles
- **Behavior**
  - Often seen perched on trees before plunging head first after its prey
  - Nests in a horizontal tunnel made in the river bank
  - Female lays five to eight eggs and both adults incubate and feed young
- **Habitat**
  - Near inland bodies of water or coasts
  - Leave northern parts of its range when water freezes
- **Fun Facts**
  - Kingfishers have reversed sexual dimorphism – the female birds are more brightly colored than the males
  - Lives in Colorado year round
  - Nests often slope uphill, allowing chicks to survive in air pockets formed by the elevated end of the tunnel when flooding occurs



## Canada Goose

- **Description**
  - Large goose with long black neck and notable white chinstrap
  - Body is a dusky grey with a white belly
  - Webbed feet and wide, flat bill
- **Habitat**
  - All kinds of water bodies across the continent, from tundra to the Gulf Coast to urban areas
- **Food**
  - A variety of plant species and parts including grasses, sedges, grains and berries
- **Behavior**
  - Dabbling birds in the water and grazers on land
  - Often fly in flocks that are in a V shape
- **Fun Facts**
  - Some migratory populations of the Canada Goose are not going as far south in the winter as they used to. This northward range shift has been attributed to changes in farm practices that makes waste grain more available in fall and winter, as well as changes in hunting pressure and changes in climate.





# Great Blue Heron

- **Description**
  - Large wading bird with a mostly blue-gray body, long legs, and a long yellow bill
  - Stand up to 4 feet tall with a 6-foot wingspan
- **Food**
  - Mainly eat small fish, though they may feed on a wide range of crawdads, aquatic insects, rodents and other small mammals, amphibians, reptiles, small birds.
- **Behavior**
  - Locate their food by sight and usually swallow it whole
  - They use long, sharp bills to spear their prey, usually foraging alone while standing in shallow water but will also feed in fields or drop from the air into water
  - They feed at night and during the day, but prefer dawn and dusk
- **Habitat**
  - Breed in colonies, called rookeries, in trees close to lakes or wetlands. Breeds from southern Alaska and central Canada southward to Central America and the Caribbean in the summer
  - Winters from southern Canada southward to northern South America, and along the coasts as far north as Alaska and Nova Scotia
- **Fun Facts**
  - After 4 to 6 years, buds grow above the rhizomes and produce leaves after reaching the soil surface
- **Program Ideas**
  - Adaptations: two large feet with four widely spread toes for walking on muddy surfaces; pointed beaks to stab prey; incredibly still when hunting; 15-17 vertebrae in their necks which allows them to extend farther to strike prey; placement of esophagus allows the shortest route to digestive track





# Mallard

- **Description**
  - Male duck has a bright green head with a white neck band and grey body
- **Habitat**
  - Found in most wetland habitats
  - Breeds from Alaska to Nova Scotia southward to Mexico, northern Texas, Tennessee, and northern Georgia. Also in Greenland and across Eurasia
  - Introduced into Australia, New Zealand, and Hawaii
  - Winters from southern Canada southward to Gulf Coast, northern Florida, and into northern Mexico
- **Food**
  - Insects and larvae, aquatic invertebrates, seeds, acorns, aquatic vegetation, grain
- **Behavior**
  - Dabbling ducks that tip forward to feed in the water
  - Often tame in urban areas
  - May group with Mallards and other ducks
- **Fun Fact**
  - The Mallard is the ancestor of nearly all domestic duck breeds. Many of the domestic breeds look like the wild birds, but usually are larger



## Northern Pintail

- **Description**
  - Long-necked duck
  - Male has brown head, white neck, and distinct tail that is long and pin-like
- **Habitat**
  - Found in shallow wetland areas for nesting season
  - Winters in freshwater habitats
  - Distribution is across North America and Eurasia
- **Food**
  - Insects, snails, foliage, seeds and grains
- **Behavior**
  - Lays 3-12 eggs for each clutch
  - Dabbling duck and filter-feeder
- **Fun Fact**
  - Often one of the first ducks to nest in the spring





## Wood Duck

- **Description**
  - Box-like head with large crest
  - Males have green head with white stripes and purple and yellow markings near eyes
- **Habitat**
  - More common in wet areas with trees, such as wooded swamps, streams, ponds and marshes
- **Food**
  - Consume mostly aquatic invertebrates and small fish as ducklings
  - Mostly plant-based diet after six weeks; aquatic plants, nuts, fruits and seeds
- **Behavior**
  - Nest in trees near water. Will nest in provided boxes people set-up if natural cavities are scarce
  - Females sometimes lay their eggs in other duck nests
  - Most find a mate in January in preparation for the breeding season in the spring
- **Fun Fact**
  - Duckling jump into water from nest that can be over 50 feet high soon after hatching
  - Only duck in North America that lays two clutches in a year



# ELC Woodpeckers

## Downy Woodpecker

- **Description**
  - A smaller woodpecker with notable white throat and chest
  - Majority of body is black and white, with the exception of a bright red spot on back of head
- **Habitat**
  - Open deciduous woodlands, especially in riparian areas. Common in human-modified habitats, such as orchards, parks, and residential areas
  - Resident from western Alaska across Canada, southward to southern California, northern Arizona, and eastern Texas to Florida
- **Food**
  - Insects and other arthropods, fruits, seeds, some cambium, sap
- **Behavior**
  - Distinct rising-and-falling flight and shrill call
  - Often found pecking at birdfeeders, branches, trunks (mostly females) and thinner branches (mostly males)
  - Flock with other bird species for protection
- **Fun Fact**
  - The Downy Woodpecker uses sources of food that larger woodpeckers cannot, such as the insect fauna of weed stems. It will cling to goldenrod galls to extract the gall fly larvae. The woodpecker prefers larger galls and uses the exit tube constructed by the larva to extract it





## Northern Flicker

- **Description**
  - 12", brown body with black breast patch, black bars on wings, black spots on belly. Rump white-very noticeable when flying
  - Red-Shafted: western North America: underwing is red and males have a red mustache. At the ELC, we have Red-Shafted Northern Flickers
  - Best way to ID: white rump (visible when flying) and red underwing
- **Food**
  - The only wood pecker that feeds on the ground-often go after ant larva underground
  - Primarily eat insects (ants, butterflies, moths, flies, beetles, etc). Can also eat fruits, berries, seeds and nuts
- **Behavior**
  - Drum on objects as communication and territory defense
  - Undulating flight with a cycle of several quick flaps followed by a pause causing a rollercoaster-like flight pattern
  - Nest in holes in trees. They excavate their own nest and both sexes help with nest excavation and incubation of eggs
  - One of the few woodpeckers that migrate-northern birds move south while southern birds often don't migrate
- **Habitat**
  - Found in open woodlands and forest edge, including cities and suburbs
  - Breeds across North America, from Alaska and northern Canada southward to Cuba and Central America
- **Fun Facts**
  - Although it can climb up the trunks of trees and hammer on wood like other woodpeckers, the Northern Flicker prefers to find food on the ground
  - Barbed tongue can extend 2" out of beak, which is used to lap up the flicker's favorite food: ants
  - Has been known to break open cow patties to eat insects inside



## References:

- **Cornell Lab of Ornithology - All About Birds:**  
<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/>
  
- **National Audubon Society:**  
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