



## The Black-Backed Woodpecker

### *Species Description*



Female black-backed woodpecker  
(*Picoides arcticus*)

Photo Credit: Mike Laycock/NPS



Male black-backed woodpecker  
(*Picoides arcticus*)

Photo Credit: Mike Laycock/NPS

The black-backed woodpecker is similar in size to the more common American robin and is heavily barred with black and white sides. Its flanks have nearly solid black upper parts and it has a white throat. Males and young have a yellow crown patch, while the female crown is entirely black. Its sooty-black dorsal plumage camouflages it against the black, charred bark of the burned trees from which it extracts the wood-boring larval prey that it depends on.

The black-backed woodpecker has several physical adaptations that make it specialized for feeding on wood-boring insect larvae in standing dead trees. It has only three toes on each foot instead of the usual four, which makes it among the most specialized of birds for delivering hard blows to dig out wood-boring insect larvae from standing dead trees.

The species is closely associated with habitat dominated by recently killed trees and is typically most abundant in stands of trees recently killed by fire. It is a cavity-nesting bird that prefers to nest and forage in burned forests that have not been salvaged or thinned, although it nests in both live and dead trees.

The black-backed woodpecker occurs across dense closed boreal and montane coniferous forests of North America from Alaska across Canada to central Labrador, and south to northern New England, northern Minnesota, and the northern Rocky Mountains. To the west of the Rocky Mountains, the species is known from the east side of the Cascade Range in Washington and Oregon and south throughout the southern Cascade Range and Sierra Nevada Range in California. The species also occurs in the Black Hills, a small mountain range that occurs in the Great Plains on the border of South Dakota and Wyoming.