

THE FAMILY LIFE OF CENTRAL AMERICAN WOODPECKERS

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Few birds, it seems to me, lead such easy, comfortable lives as the woodpeckers. The specialization of bill, tongue, feet and internal structure which enables them to carve into fairly hard wood places at their disposal rich supplies of food quite inaccessible to all their bird-neighbors. But while they have the more deeply imbedded wood-boring grubs all to themselves, the majority of the woodpeckers remain sufficiently flexible in structure and mentality to take advantage of other sources of nourishment. They eat fruit, catch flying insects, and some even store acorns and dead insects for less bountiful seasons. By virtue of their energy, resourcefulness and forehandedness, they easily satisfy their appetites and enjoy much spare time for rest or play. In this they contrast sharply with such small insectivorous birds as warblers and gnatcatchers, which must devote most of their waking hours to the unending quest for food.

True addicts to the life of ease and luxury, they disdain to pass the night exposed to rain and wind, in the manner of the majority of birds, but as evening falls seek the snug bedchambers they have carved for themselves in dead trunks and branches, where they sleep warm and dry. Compared with most other kinds of birds, they as a rule go early to bed and get up late, for, like other creatures with comfortable beds, they are frequently reluctant to quit them. Their eggs and nestlings, placed in these same neatly carved cavities, generally at a good height, are less exposed to attack by snake and hawk and

weasel than those of birds that nest in the open. Hence baby woodpeckers can afford to linger longer in the nest than the young of most small birds; for as a rule, the greater the nestlings' exposure to attack, the more precocious their dispersal. Young woodpeckers do not venture forth from their snug nursery until they can fly well and escape most of their enemies. Because of its relatively high reproductive efficiency, added to its adaptability, the woodpecker family has been highly successful in the struggle for existence, has evolved a great number of species, spread to most of the wooded regions of the earth, and even become established in certain areas practically devoid of native trees, such as the pampas of Argentina, where a species of flicker is at home.

To other birds as well as to man, woodpeckers are among the most useful citizens of the bird-world. They serve man by devouring wood-boring insects that destroy trees. The holes they carve into dead wood for dormitories and nest-cavities later become the sleeping and nesting places of a variety of other birds. Numerous kinds of wrens, flycatchers, cotingas, ovenbirds (*Furnariidae*), toucans, etc., raise their families in holes originally carved by woodpeckers, or else use them as dormitories. Birds such as the tityras of tropical America would have a hard time, indeed, finding sites for their nests, were it not for the activities of the woodpeckers. They and many other kinds of birds owe the woodpeckers a great debt of gratitude. Even the little hummingbirds, which sometimes sip the sweet sap or gather the insects that collect in the pits made in the bark of