



# Bird Notes

From Northeast Kingdom Audubon  
1302 Main Street, Saint Johnsbury, Vermont 05819

## For Immediate Release

### Blessed Are the Sapsuckers

We need cold nights and warm days. Waiting for just the right conditions gives me time to set up the new hobby evaporator. The taps are set to let the precious maple liquid fill my buckets as I wait. Sinzibuckwud is the Algonquin word for maple syrup, meaning "drawn from wood." As the Algonquins recognized the sap as a source of energy and nutrition, so do the woodpeckers we know as the yellow-bellied sapsucker, soon to arrive. Some non-birders may think it a humorous name, however it is a widespread species with a habit of making shallow holes to get sap with its long, brush-tipped tongue.

If we drill our taps and set our buckets out at about the same height around the tree for our convenience, perhaps the sapsuckers locate their holes in a line for their convenience. New holes usually are made in a line with old holes, or in a new line above the old. At any rate, the holes certainly make it easy for us to recognize where they have been. These "wells" of sap attract insects for the hummingbirds, other woodpeckers, warblers and even flying squirrels to consume. Interestingly, the yellow-bellied sapsucker makes two kinds of holes in trees, deep round holes for sap sucking and shallower rectangular holes maintained continually for the sap to flow. The sapsucker licks the sap from these holes, and also eats the inner cambium layer along with many kinds of insects mixed in. This sort of protein soup becomes the mainstay of the diet during the nest season.

You can't miss them. With looks which include messy black and whitish barring on the back, sidestripes and red splotches on the head and neck (male only), they resemble other woodpeckers. However, when something sounds like irregular banging on a can, we suspect that a sapsucker is announcing itself on its territory and the louder the better. This 7-9 inch bird can make itself seem much, much larger by amplifying its Morse code-like tapping on various metal objects that are handy, apparently with no ill effects.

A truly migratory woodpecker, the sapsuckers will soon be returning from as far south as Panama. Some may have spent the winter in the southern part of their breeding range, feeding on suet cakes and even at hummingbird feeders. Their populations appear stable suggesting that they have probably benefited from any removal of mature forests leaving forest gaps and more edge habitat.

Happy Sapsucker Birding!

Carolyn E. Boardman is a board member of NEK Audubon living in Brownington, Vermont. NEK Audubon is one of 8 chapters of Audubon Vermont and part of the National Audubon Society. NEK Audubon is a non-profit organization that encourages people's enjoyment of birds, wildlife and natural habitats through field trips, programs and publications. For previous Bird Notes, as well as, information about meetings, field trips and special events visit [www.nekaudubon.org](http://www.nekaudubon.org). Art work by Robin Rothman.

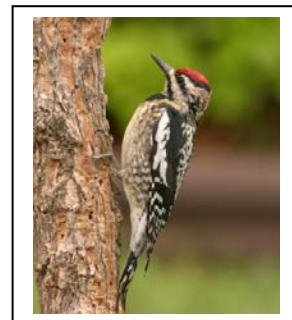


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