

## ARCTIC THREE-TOED WOODPECKER IN WESTERN NEW YORK

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The Arctic Three-toed Woodpecker (*Picoides arcticus*) inhabits the northern coniferous forests in northern United States and Canada. It prefers the dense woods but occasionally forsakes this habitat during late fall and winter and is found in areas south of its normal home.

The bird's occurrence in western New York is erratic, not following any predictable pattern. The first definite record of its presence in this area was on Dec. 29, 1884 in Chautauqua Co. (Eaton, E. H., *Birds of New York*, Vol. 1, Edson's county list); the next definite date one on Nov. 26, 1901 from Erie Co. (Eaton *ibid.*, Erie Co. list). Two birds were seen (one collected) near Rochester on Oct. 20 and 24, 1923 (Auk Vol. XLI, p. 351). One female was observed and collected by Mr. Clark S. Beardslee at Java Lake, Wyoming Co. on Jan. 24, 1932. He observed another female on Nov. 11, 1932 at Medina, Orleans Co. To my knowledge there were no records in succeeding years until last winter when six apparently different individuals were observed.

The first bird was observed on Oct. 3, 1953 at Olcott, Niagara Co., near the shore of Lake Ontario. Here Mr. Walter Klabunde, his wife and friends observed a male in a small stand of mature pines. On Oct. 10, 1953 Mr. Maxwell Wheeler saw a bird on his property at Protection, Erie Co. (the most southern record). This was a male and was working on the branches of a fallen evergreen tree in the middle of a partially cleared swampy woods.

On Oct. 27, 1953 Mrs. Stickney observed a male in an old orchard which had recently been developed into a residential section of Orchard Park, Erie Co.

Mr. W. L. Edson reporting the records of the Burrough's Audubon Society of Rochester, Monroe Co. for Christmas week of 1953 states, "William Muchmore found a male Arctic Three-toed Woodpecker in Rochester's Genesee Valley Park in the vicinity of the Elmwood Avenue underpass. This bird was observed off and on for several weeks in this same locality."

On Feb. 7, 1954 while on a field trip with the Buffalo Audubon Society Miss Annabell Hiller of Jamestown, N. Y. discovered a male bird in the Youngstown Cemetery, Niagara Co. This bird was observed by all of the people in the group while he worked on the branches of a fallen oak tree. This station was one half mile inland from Lake Ontario and about ten miles west of Olcott where the species was first seen. A week later when looking for this bird I found markings on several piles of brush in the cemetery woodlot and also on brush in an orchard one half mile to the east of the cemetery but I failed to see this bird.

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 Allen Breakfast, Glenside, Ithaca, N. Y., August 29, 1954

Photo by David G. Allen

My own observation of this woodpecker came on the afternoon of Dec. 7, 1953, the day of the annual Buffalo Audubon Society Christmas Count. We were riding through the hilly section between Chestnut Ridge and Emery Park. About an hour before sundown Mr. Ulrich, Mr. Francis Tilley and I entered a woodlot with some mature hemlocks and hardwoods where considerable wood had been cut. Soon we came upon a large pile of brush which was marked by the work of the Arctic Three-toed Woodpecker. Our hunting instincts were sharpened and we began to search more diligently. Soon we heard what we thought might be a downy's tapping but working in that direction we traced the sound to a tree at a wire fence near the edge of the woods. We found it to be a female Arctic Three-toed Woodpecker.

The bird fed on this tree girdled by the wires of the fence and confined its activities to the space around the old wire. It would alternately pound on opposite sides of the work area, flaking pieces off each side, ultimately exposing a four by five inch area of the old tinner bark. The flexibility of the three-toed feet was apparent as the bird moved from side to side. The flakes which fell to the ground were about one quarter inch thick, one half to one inch in width and about two and one half inches long. To reach the larvae the bird pierced the work area with small round holes.

The rhythm of its poundings lacked the length and rolling quality of the Hairy or Downy Woodpeckers. Its action resolved into one long tap, two shorts, a pause and a repetition of this every few seconds. For half an hour the bird dug continuously while we watched from a distance of thirty feet. Soon an accipiter hawk flew over the adjoining field. The bird stopped digging and immediately left the reddish working area freezing to the darker trunk about four feet higher on the tree. This immobility lasted fully five minutes and was broken only after a White-breasted Nuthatch gave his musical call note from deeper in the woods. This signaled a return of activity at the feeding place. After satisfying its appetite the woodpecker inched its way up the tree, pecked about a bit, fluffed its feathers and left for taller hemlocks not far away.

As there are no definite reasons known for the sporadic occurrence of this bird in western New York I can only offer the following opinions. Forbush (*Birds of Massachusetts and other New England States*) said that its erratic migration is not due to, 1. inclement weather, for at least one has come in a mild winter and 2. not scarcity of food alone because the species has occurred in numbers when the northern food supply was abundant. Dr. Josselyn Van Tyne (*Auk* Vol. 43, p. 469-474) expressed the opinion that it might be due to increased fecundity brought on by abundance of food. The greater fecundity resulting in a larger northern population and the resulting influx into peripheral areas.

All but one of the 1953-54 individuals were males. In each of the six cases only one bird was observed in the immediate vicinity. Only the Rochester and Youngstown birds were observed more than once. From past experience it would seem that we must wait ten or twenty years before seeing this bird again in the Niagara Frontier region.

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