

Flicker Dance

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Finally, at the very end of the wettest March I can recall, the rains subsided and the sun broke through. It was time to throw off the vestiges of cabin fever with a walk along Canyon Oaks Trail here in Sun City Lincoln Hills in western Placer County.

The trail segment my wife and I walk runs east and west between Crescent Lane and Hidden Hills Lane, a distance of about one km. The gravel and dirt trail runs along an annual stream through riparian habitat consisting principally of Interior Live Oak, Blue Oak, and Valley Oak with a sprinkling of willows, cottonwoods and other trees. Complementing this mix along the creek are Himalayan Blackberry and cattail. The slopes of the narrow canyon are covered in grasses and flowering plants (e.g., vetch, filaree, etc.). The area is a treasure trove of birds and most (especially the Acorn Woodpeckers) felt as we did—emancipated.

About 300 m east of Hidden Hills Lane we spotted four or five active Northern Flickers (*Colaptes auratus*) in the grass. It seemed a little unusual to me as I more often see them in the trees in ones or twos. One or more of the flickers made short vocalizations I didn't recognize as characteristic of flickers.

A few moments later we saw a male flicker hopping from rock to rock angling toward us along a stone retaining wall on the south side of the trail. He ignored us as I started photographing him from about 15 m away. Suddenly, a second male flicker appeared, seemingly agitated, facing the calmer flicker. The agitated flicker began his "dance" leaning abruptly to the left and then to the right with his bill angled upward, flaring the underside of his tail feathers toward the other male each time, flicking his wings and moving closer to the other male. The passive flicker ceased his rock-hopping and seemingly "froze" with his nape feathers raised as the aggressive flicker moved closer and closer.

Finally, the apparent interloper appeared to defer to the more aggressive male which had moved to within a few inches. After a few moments, the passive flicker moved to a lower position below the aggressive flicker and then both flickers flew off. The whole incident took no longer than two or three minutes (see back cover).

Naturalists from at least Audubon's time have commented on this flicker "dance" (Bent 1939), which is considered an aggressive display used for territorial defense and/or mate selection and seen almost exclusively in early spring (Noble 1936, Wiebe and Moore 2008). This encounter can occur between two or more males or between two or more females, but is not generally observed between members of the opposite sex. Francis H. Allen's field notes from the early 1930s (Bent 1939) may describe it best:

“Two birds face each other...and spread their tails and jerk their heads about in a sort of waving motion, frequently uttering a note that is peculiar to this performance, wick-up or week-up. The head motion is a series of backward jerks with the bill pointing up at an angle of perhaps 60° and the head at the same time swinging from side to side.”

The bouts of dancing are generally brief with one bird finally surrendering the ground, but the encounters can go on for more than a half hour. Wiebe and Moore (2008) note that in the eastern subspecies, which has yellow shafted flight (wing and tail) feathers rather than the red of our western subspecies, birds frequently erect the red feathers on their nape during this display. My observation of the raised nape feathers is interesting as our western flickers lack the red color on the nape.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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LITERATURE CITED

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