



The sapsucker is the culprit responsible for the circles of holes around tree trunks



The male Yellow-breasted Sapsucker has a red throat, the female's throat is white. Note the yellow wash underneath.

Brunswick Wildlife

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker: Not Just a Funny Name

Yes, I exist. No, my name is not just a name one third-grader might hurl at another. You may have never seen me. I am stealthy, well camouflaged, and I am only in the Lower Cape Fear in winter.

Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers are arriving to spend the winter with us! There are eight species of woodpeckers that may be found in North Carolina. The other seven are year-round residents.

This member of the woodpecker family chisels rings of small holes (sap wells) in the bark of trees, feeding on the sap as it flows and the insects drawn to it. Sapsuckers maintain their wells daily to ensure adequate flow. They may also glean insects from tree trunks or catch them in midair.

Sapsuckers are a “keystone” species in that they help support an ecological community. They are responsible for creating cavities that, when abandoned, are used by other species of birds and mammals that cannot excavate their own cavities. Flying squirrels are just one of many dependent species.

Other animals may supplement their diet with sap from sapsucker wells or the insects found in them. For example, overwintering hummingbirds may count on this supplementary diet.

The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker is a medium-sized woodpecker that has a white stripe down the edge of its folded wing. Its muted body plumage, including a blurry black and white barred back, contrasts to its sharp red-black-and-white head pattern.

The male's throat is completely red while the female has a white throat. Both generally have a red crown. The sapsucker's red crown and throat add much needed color to a winter scene.

Sapsuckers breed in forests in the northeast, across Canada, and in eastern Alaska. They are highly migratory, generally overwintering south of their breeding grounds...in the southeast, West Indies, and Central America. There is, however, a year-round population residing in a small area of the North Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee mountains.

For the past two years, I have had a sapsucker spend the winter in my neighborhood. I caught him visiting my small oak trees and, as you can see in the photo, my suet feeder. It may be the same bird each year since birds sometimes show fidelity to their winter home as they would for their breeding territory.

Most of you may have seen sapsucker wells. Unfortunately, my only good photo showing the rings of holes is a headshot of a Gray Squirrel.

Want to find a sapsucker? For the reasons I mentioned in the first paragraph plus the fact that they do not announce themselves loudly like Red-bellied and other woodpeckers, it is not easy unless you see them fly in. In my experience, they land near the base of a tree and then climb up to a juicy spot.

In addition to watching your suet feeder, the best plan is to hike areas with mature hardwoods. In our area sapsuckers may be found in a variety of hardwood habitats: open forests including parks, forest edges, and bottomlands. Southport, Brunswick Town, and Ev-Henwood (bottomlands) would be good places to start.

Listen for soft tapping and look for fresh sap wells. In spring, listen for their soft mewing call as they practice defending their territory before reaching their breeding grounds.

These guys may also be found in mixed-species foraging flocks of winter with chickadees, bluebirds, Yellow-rumped Warblers, and others.

Good luck! My wish for you is that you have one of these red-black-and-white ornaments hanging from one of your trees or feeders during the holidays. For me too!

John Ennis



Like other members of the woodpecker family, sapsuckers
will hang around for suet