

First records of Black-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides arcticus*) nesting in Nevada

T. WILL RICHARDSON
Biological Resources Research Center/314
University of Nevada, Reno
Reno, NV 89557

INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 2002, the first documented nests of Black-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides arcticus*) within the state of Nevada were discovered. These two nests were found in stands of quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) located on the western slope of the Carson Range in the Lake Tahoe Basin (Fig. 1).

A review of the literature reveals that almost all records for Tahoe and Nevada are from fall and winter months. Orr and Moffitt (1971) provide no account of nesting for the Lake Tahoe Basin, and they did not give any records for the Nevada side of the lake. Ryser (1985) simply describes the species as a "rare resident in the western edge of the Great Basin, where it has been recorded from Eagle Lake (CA), Lake Tahoe, and the Carson Range."

Alcorn (1988) summarizes published reports of this species in Nevada; all sightings occurred in the Tahoe area and all occurred outside of the breeding season. He provides no confirmed breeding records. Dixon and Saab (2000) include the Carson Range (southwestern Washoe Co.) as part of Black-backed Woodpecker breeding range based on several records of "probable breeding" from the Nevada Breeding Bird Atlas (T. Floyd pers. comm.). Thus, the discovery of these nests provides the first confirmation of breeding for this species in the state of Nevada.

DESCRIPTIONS OF RECORDS

The first nest (BBWO1) was discovered in an aspen snag near the southeastern edge of Marlette Lake in Washoe County (UTM: NAD 27, 11 S

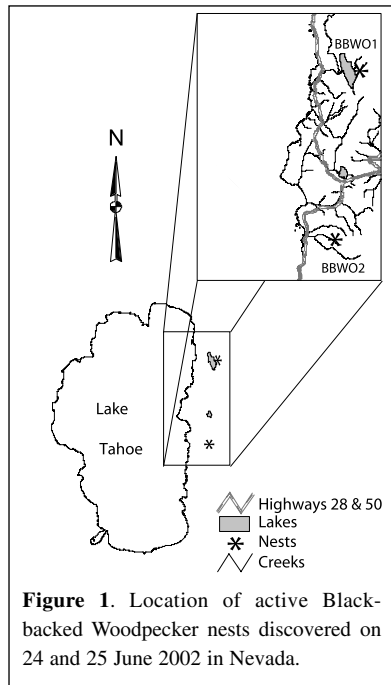


Figure 1. Location of active Black-backed Woodpecker nests discovered on 24 and 25 June 2002 in Nevada.

0250120, 4339705) on 24 June 2002. The snag itself was approximately 6 m in height and 37.2 cm diameter at breast height (dbh), and it was located in a narrow stringer of pure aspen. The cavity entrance was 380 cm above the ground and faced northwest (311P). The area around the cavity entrance was largely denuded of bark.

Both adult woodpeckers were observed feeding young at the cavity entrance, and they were occasionally seen in the immediate vicinity of the nest (<10 m) at same time. Both adults made frequent "kyik" calls while in the area of the nest. The male visited the nest at estimated 5-15 minute intervals. The female visited the nest at slightly longer intervals, which most studies indicate is typical (Dixon and Saab 2000). No identification was made of the food items brought by the adults. No estimate of the number of young was made, although a single nestling, which always appeared similar, was often visible at the cavity entrance (Fig. 2). Judging by the extent and forward position of the yellow feathers of the crown, this nestling was probably a male (*vide* P. Pyle). The nestling gave occasional "kyik" calls, suggesting that it was near fledging (Dixon and Saab 2000), and loud "churring" calls while being fed. The nestling was estimated 20 days old at the time of discovery. No Black-backed Woodpecker activity was observed during a follow-up visit 17 July 2002.

The second nest (BBWO2) was discovered in a live aspen along Logan House Creek in Douglas County (UTM: NAD 27, 11 S 0247773, 4326974) on 25 June 2002. The nest tree, located in a narrow stringer of aspen interspersed with a few small White Firs (*Abies concolor*), was 35 cm dbh and estimated to be approximately 22 m in height. The cavity entrance was 94 cm above the ground and faced west (251P). A small area around the cavity entrance was stripped of bark.



Figure 2. Nestling Black-backed Woodpecker near Marlette Lake, Washoe Co., NV (24 June 2002). The extent and position of the yellow crown patch suggests that this is probably a male. Note: Hairy Woodpecker (*Picoides villosus*) in juvenal plumage can (rarely) have yellow crown feathers also (Pyle 1997).

Adults entered the Logan House cavity to feed the young, suggesting that the nestlings were <13 days old on 25 June (Dixon and Saab 2000). The adults at BBWO2 were considerably more wary of my presence and were hesitant to visit the nest when I was in sight. The male adult (Fig. 3) often perched above the cavity entrance (for up to several minutes) before entering the cavity. This wariness is possibly a combination of the low cavity entrance and the less-developed young. The male adult visited the nest at 12-15 minute intervals, with occasional absences in excess of 15 minutes. The female was only observed once in nearly

an hour and a half of observation. Again, no determination was made of the food items brought by the adults. Adults occasionally made "kyik" calls while in the vicinity of the nest tree. Quiet "churring" could occasionally be heard coming from the cavity, and when adults entered the cavity, the young became extremely vocal. No young were observed at the cavity entrance. Also, no determination was made of the number of young, although what sounded like multiple voices could be heard from within the cavity. A follow-up visit on 12 July 2002 revealed no Black-backed Woodpecker activity, and a later visit on 12 August 2002 found large mushrooms growing from the cavity entrance.

It is interesting, though perhaps coincidence, that both nests were located less than 15 meters to the south of steep but low (3-4 m high) ridges and approximately 10 meters to the north or northeast of large riparian areas full of willow (*Salix* sp.).

DISCUSSION

Black-backed Woodpeckers are known to nest in aspen throughout their range, but Dixon and Saab (2000) do not list aspen as important to the species. That both nests were discovered in aspen trees may be an artifact of coverage; I was



Figure 3. Adult male Black-backed Woodpecker exiting nest cavity, Logan House Creek, Douglas County, NV (25 June 2002).

conducting point counts in that habitat when the nests were found. Black-backed Woodpecker nests have been found around nearby Truckee, Calif., in burned fir and pine-fir and unburned Lodgepole Pine (*Pinus contorta*) habitats (n=7, Raphael and White 1984). However, the species of the nest tree may be less important than the availability of suitable foraging habitat near the nest. Adults are reported to forage within several hundred meters of the nest (Dixon and Saab 2000), thus a variety of habitats were within foraging distance of these two nests. The longer interval between visits associated with BBWO2 could be indicative of lower-

quality foraging habitat or a greater distance to feeding areas.

Black-backed Woodpeckers have a well-established pattern of moving into recently burned coniferous forests. This habit is so characteristic for the species that Dixon and Saab (2000) describe their range as "confined mostly to burned-over coniferous sites." It is interesting to note that the foraging areas available from the nests have been free from significant fire for many years. However, both nests were located near substantial stands of beetle-killed coniferous trees (S. Espinoza pers. comm.). During the drought years of 1987-1993, reports from the Tahoe Basin showed significant increases in mortality of Jeffrey Pine (*Pinus jeffreyi*) due to the Jeffrey Pine Beetle (*Dendroctonus jeffreyi*) and White

Fir due to the Fir Engraver Beetle (*Scolytus ventralis*), and now many patches of standing dead trees may be found throughout the basin and the Carson Range (Rizzo and Maloney 2000). These increases in standing dead trees have likely allowed for greater foraging opportunities for Black-backed Woodpecker in the Tahoe Basin and the Carson Range.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Peter Pyle reviewed slides of the BBWO2 juvenile and provided comments on the manuscript itself. Ted Floyd provided comments and data from the Nevada Breeding Bird Atlas Project. Shawn Espinoza provided information on recent fire history and beetle kill in the Carson Range. These discoveries were made possible through the Lake Tahoe License Plate Grant program of the Nevada Division of State Lands.

LITERATURE CITED

- Alcorn, J. R. 1988. **The Birds of Nevada**. Fairview West Publishers. Fallon, NV.
- Dixon, R.D. and V.A. Saab. 2000. Black-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides arcticus*). In: **The Birds of North America**. No. 509. (Poole, A. and Gill, F. eds.). The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, PA, and The American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.
- Orr, R.T. and J. Moffitt. 1971. **Birds of the Lake Tahoe Region**. California Academy of Sciences. San Francisco, CA.
- Pyle, P. 1997. **Identification Guide to North American Birds, Part I**. Slate Creek Press. Bolinas, CA.
- Raphael, M.G. and M. White. 1984. Use of snags by cavity-nesting birds in the Sierra Nevada. **Wildlife Monographs** 86:1-66.
- Rizzo, D.M. and P.E. Maloney. 2000. Causes and Patterns of Tree Mortality in Lake Tahoe Basin Forests. **Tahoe Research Group Annual Report**. University of California at Davis. <<http://trg.ucdavis.edu/research/annualreport/contents/forest/article24.html>> Accessed 13 April 2003.
- Ryser, Jr., F.A. 1985. **Birds of the Great Basin**. University of Nevada Press. Reno, NV.