

Look out for fine-feathered woodpeckers

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Quick quiz: If you see a woodpecker on the ground, especially this month, chances are it is a:

- A. hairy
- B. downy
- C. grungy
- D. flicker
- E. twitcher.

If you chose E, you're right. These fine-feathered woodpeckers dine mostly on ants and beetles that lurk underground — and October is prime migration time.

Northern flickers, aka yellow-shafted flickers in the East, just might be the most beautiful of our New Jersey woodpeckers.

Let me count the ways.

Most notably, the undersides of their wings and tail feathers are a wondrous silky yellow, as if lined by a custom tailor. These brownish woodpeckers have black-freckled chests, a red heart shape high on their backs, plus a whitish patch on their rumps so you can ID them as they fly.

But their most distinctive feature (aside from those dazzling yellow under-wing feathers) just might be their tongue, said to be the longest of any North American bird.

Their tongues can stick out 2 inches beyond the tip of their beak. While many woodpeckers' tongues have barbed tips, the flicker's is flattened, with extra-sticky



A northern flicker looks for ants in an Allendale yard.

COURTESY OF JIM WRIGHT

saliva for nabbing those pesky insects.

If these birds eat so many ants, why aren't they called ant-eaters, much in the way that yellow-bellied woodpeckers that suck sap are known as sapsuckers?

Aside from being distinguished from aardvarks, flickers are reportedly called flickers either because of a sound they make (a repeated "flick-a") or because the

bright yellow undersides of their wings resemble flickering flames in flight.

I'm not buying either explanation. I'd like to think they're called flickers because they must flick those incredibly long tongues a lot.

Just how prevalent are flickers this time of year? Consider this story from birding legend Pete Dunne.

In an article that Dunne once wrote about flickers, he talked about the time he ran Morris County's Scherman-Hoffman Sanctuary one autumn.

As Dunne drove to work one day, "big-bodied birds exploded into motion as the car passed. The migrant woodpeckers flashed yellow under-wings and displayed telltale white rumps. 'Going to be a flicker day on the phone' I knew before I even parked the car."

Dunne was right. When he got to work, the phone was already ringing off the hook. He answered with three simple words: "It's a flicker."

The caller sputtered: "Is this the Audubon Society?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Dunne replied.

"Oh, good," the woman replied. "Maybe you can help me. There's this strange bird sitting on our lawn"

Wrote Dunne: "No doubt about it. A flicker day for sure."

P.S.: The other time of year when homeowners are most aware of flickers is in the spring. That's when the males drum on metal chimneys to let the females know they are back in town and in the mood for love.

The Bird Watcher column appears every other Thursday. Email Jim at celervfarm@gmail.com.