



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

July 22, 2022



Photo by Jenn Guess

The Complex Lives of Acorn Woodpeckers

With their striking black and white bodies and faces and bright red caps on the tops of their head, Acorn Woodpeckers are a beautiful species. The red cap of the males extends down the forehead, connecting with the white plumage between the eyes. The females have less red, with the cap stopping further back on the head.

These birds are commonly found along the west coast of California and Oregon, wherever there is an ample supply of oak trees. Although they will often eat insects, they are most famously known for harvesting acorns from oak trees and storing the nuts in individually drilled holes. Occasionally these woodpeckers will also store other varieties of nuts including almonds, walnuts, hazelnuts, and pecans. Acorn Woodpeckers will pick specific storage trees, called granaries, and these storage sites have been known to hold up to 50,000 nuts. They will reuse storage holes, and drill new ones as needed. Unfortunately, these birds have also been known to drill holes in telephone poles, wooden fence posts, and wood-sided buildings. The best way to deter Acorn Woodpeckers from drilling holes into wooden structures is to install hard siding over exposed wood surfaces.

Acorn Woodpeckers have a very complicated social structure. They reside in family groups of ten to fifteen individuals. All adults in a flock aggressively defend their granaries and territory. The flock is made up of a maximum of three breeding females and seven breeding males, with additional family members serving as helpers. There is monogamy and polygamy within the breeding adults, and all members of the family help raise the young. The breeding females lay their eggs in the same nest, which is created by hollowing out a cavity in a tree. Once the eggs are laid, one male and one female will incubate the eggs for the first week. Afterwards all members of the flock take turns incubating the eggs and helping feed and protect the young birds after hatching.

Here at CWC we have species protocols when it comes to rehabilitating Acorn Woodpeckers. It is critical that we obtain the exact address of injured adults, since they will need to be returned to their original flock after rehabilitation. Releasing an Acorn Woodpecker outside of their territory would be a death sentence for the individual. The situation is different for young woodpeckers. Each year, all the orphaned woodpeckers at CWC are combined into one flock. This flock is then moved into our large outdoor songbird aviary where they become acclimated to the weather, build up flight muscles, and communicate with the local woodpeckers in the area. Eventually the young birds are released on site, and we provide them with food and water while they explore their surroundings and either assimilate into the existing flock or carve out their own territory.



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On July 15th the first orphaned Acorn Woodpecker of the season was admitted to CWC. This nestling was found on the ground at a job site where tree trimmers were working. Minimal background information was provided about the orphan, and we were unable to ascertain the address of the nest site. Technicians performed an intake exam and determined that the young male patient was in overall good health. After being hydrated he was transferred to our Orphan Care Unit, where he is currently being fed every 30 minutes. We commonly admit orphaned Acorn Woodpeckers during the months of June, July, and August, and so we expect this woodpecker will have a nestmate any day now.

Acorn Woodpeckers take their first flight directly from the nest, unlike many other bird species who spend about a week on the ground learning how to fly from the ground up. If you see a young woodpecker on the ground, examine surrounding trees to see if there is a cavity nest nearby. These nests can be very difficult to find since the cavity entrance is only about two inches in diameter and the nest can be located twenty to eighty feet high on tree trunks and limbs. If no nest can be located, the young bird would need to be kept in a warm, quiet, dark location and admitted to a local wildlife rehabilitation center.