



# California Wildlife Center

## Patient of the Week

### February 17, 2023



Patient in her enclosure in ICU

## How Much Wood Does This Woodpecker Peck...? None

Here at CWC we see a variety of colorful birds come through our doors. One of the most stunning patients admitted to our facility is the Northern Flicker. Northern Flickers are a medium sized woodpecker (about the size of a pigeon). They have brown body feathers with black spots on their abdomens and black bars on the tops of their wings. Here in western North America, Northern Flickers have a bright rosy-red coloration on the undersides of their wings and tails. In eastern North America, the flickers have a yellow on their flight feathers, instead of red.



Top of a Northern Flicker's wing

The coloration on Northern Flickers is determined by carotenoid pigments. Carotenoids are yellow, orange, and red organic pigments that are produced by plants, algae, bacteria, and fungi. The differences in the eastern and western flickers' colors are due to how the separate populations process the carotenoid pigments that they eat. Even if the birds are given the exact same diet, and eastern flicker will produce yellow feathers and the western flicker will produce red feathers.

Although Northern Flickers are a type of woodpecker they do not perch on trees and logs and drill holes into wood to find and store food. Instead, they feed on the ground while rapidly pecking at the dirt. Their beaks have evolved to be slightly curved, which helps them excavate insects from the soil. This curved beak is unique from other woodpeckers, whose bills come to a sharp point. Northern Flickers are able to use their strong beaks to carve nests into soft, dead trees, but their bills would most likely break if they needed to consistently peck holes into hard wood.

Ants are the favorite food of Northern Flickers. It is believed that these birds eat more ants than any other bird in North America. Flickers also feed on other insects and will eat fruits, berries, seeds, and nuts in the winter when bugs are harder to find. Sometimes flickers can be seen "bathing" in ants. When ants are threatened, they will release formic acid as a defense. This acid will get onto the flicker and act as an antiparasitic to help ward off mites and other ectoparasites.



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Recently, an adult female Northern Flicker was admitted to CWC after flying into a window. Upon examination she was lethargic and had experienced trauma near her left shoulder. Technicians administered fluids and prescribed anti-inflammatories and pain medication for the patient. Within 24 hours the flicker was already showing marked improvement. She was able to navigate around her enclosure, perch upright on logs, and was even eating some of the mealworms that were offered. We also provided her with various types of berries and seeds in her enclosure, in an attempt to mimic her natural winter diet.

The Northern Flicker is still in our ICU, where she will need at least two weeks of confinement before we attempt a test flight. It is critical that she does not put much force on her left shoulder until it has had time to heal, or else she could end up causing more trauma to the area.

If you find a woodpecker with an injury, place them in a box in a warm, quiet, and dark location and contact your local wildlife rehabilitation center. Although some injuries look mild, they can be life threatening if not treated by a medical professional. You can do even more to help wildlife by using bird tape on all windows and glass fences. Bird tape creates an opaque strip along the glass that alerts wild animals to the presence of a solid object. Support this Northern Flicker and thousands more wild animals in need by donating at [cawildlife.org](http://cawildlife.org).