



# California Wildlife Center

## Patient of the Week

July 5, 2024

### The Busy Drillers of the Wild

It is common to spot the resident Acorn Woodpeckers on the California Wildlife Center campus busily drilling the nearby trees. We also currently have two Acorn Woodpeckers in our care that were found orphaned. One of the patients was thought to have fallen out of their nest in Calabasas and sustained some mild injuries and the other was found orphaned with some mild neurological symptoms that have since resolved. The Acorn Woodpecker is a striking bird, with a red crown and bright black and white body. These birds are known for their social structures and complex behaviors.



Fledgling Acorn Woodpecker in care at CWC.

As their name suggests, Acorn Woodpeckers are enthusiastic about acorns. Acorns make up about half of the woodpecker's diet. However, they do not just eat acorns, they expertly store and manage them. These birds use their beaks to drill holes, usually into a single tree called a granary tree, for the storage of their acorns. Overtime, stored acorns dry and shrivel, it is then that the woodpecker will move the nut into a tighter hole, ensuring another animal doesn't have access to them. There are granary trees that have been used by generations of Acorn Woodpeckers and have thousands of holes! Members of a woodpecker family defend their granary tree from other animals and even other Acorn Woodpeckers from outside their family.

Acorn Woodpeckers are very social creatures and have complex family systems. They can often live in groups of a dozen or more. This species employs all members from their social circle, both breeding and nonbreeding members, to brood, feed and keep an eye on the young of the group. In fact, in some family circles, with multiple breeding females, they will lay their eggs in one nest. These families often work together to hold their territory and establish complex hierarchies within their families.

Territory is so important to this species that when CWC admits an adult Acorn Woodpecker they ask the rescuer to be as specific as possible on the found location. In fact, knowing the exact tree the animal was found by can be lifesaving, as being released in the wrong location can result in death for these highly social animals. Once rehabilitated, CWC makes every effort to release the patient back to the exact location that they were found. However, orphaned Acorn Woodpeckers are exclusively released on-site since they do not yet have an established territory. Once the orphaned patients are ready to move to an outdoor enclosure, they are kept there for an extended period, which allows them to communicate with the wild flock, through the safety of the enclosure. If they were released without having previously communicated with the local flock, they would likely not be accepted and killed. Through the enclosure, the young birds can communicate safely with the wild flock, this establishes their place in the hierarchy and allows them to join the group once released.

The Acorn Woodpecker is a busy bird who utilizes their close family network to protect their territory and their coveted acorns. We look forward to spotting our newest patients around CWC in the coming months!



Acorn Woodpecker patient perches on wood enrichment.