

## Yellow-bellied Sapsucker *Sphyrapicus varius*



**Folk Name:** Suck-sap, Sapsucker, Yellow-bellied Woodpecker

**Status:** Winter Resident

**Abundance:** Uncommon to Fairly Common

**Habitat:** Open woods, parks, wooded neighborhoods

The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker is about 1 ¼ inches larger than a Downy Woodpecker and about three quarter inches smaller than the Red-bellied, Red-headed, or Hairy Woodpecker. It can best be identified “when climbing up a tree trunk by a conspicuous white stripe down each wing.” Males have red on both their fore crown and throat, while the female’s throat is white. This bird gets its common name from the lemon yellow that is visible on the belly of both sexes. Sapsuckers drill horizontal rows of small holes on the trunk of a variety of trees and return later to drink the sap and eat any insects that have gotten stuck there. Like several other woodpeckers, sapsuckers will occasionally eat berries in winter to supplement their diet.

The sapsucker is a winter resident that generally arrives in the region in very late September or early October and departs for its breeding grounds by the end of April. Our earliest arrival date appears to be 17 September. Our latest confirmed departure date is 11 May. We have more than two dozen reports of Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers on Spring Bird Counts held in the region during the last week of April or the first two weeks of May. Spring count observers in Stanly County and Iredell County independently reported Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers lingering as late as 14 May in 1977, but the state compiler recommended these sightings be eliminated from the final published report saying they were “much too late for the species” in the Piedmont, and, regrettably, there were “no details reported.”

We have no acceptable records from the months of June, July, or August. Occasional reports of this species during summer months that show up on local biological surveys conducted in this region are believed to indicate the presence of old sapsucker holes seen at the survey site, not the bird itself.

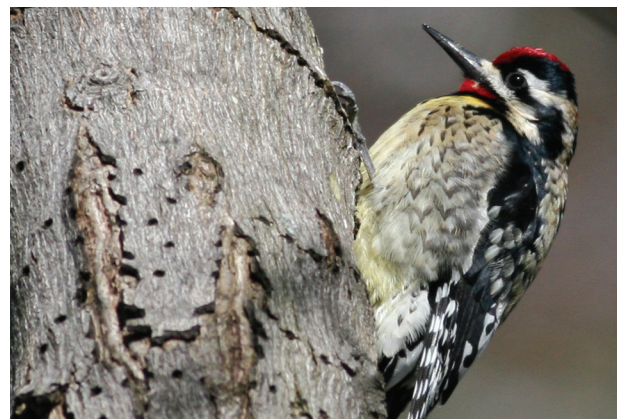
There are many historic notes about “sapsuckers” in this region, but readers should be cautious as sapsucker was once a common designation used to mean any of our small woodpeckers. One example of this comes from an article about the importance of birds, written by Charles Petty of Spartanburg, published in *The Charlotte News* on July 4, 1908:

The wren, blue bird and all the sapsucker and peckerwood families want hollow stumps



and decayed trees for making nests. This is impracticable since nearly all land has been cleared and no deadened timber is left. ...The woodpecker wants his decaying tree. They can be furnished by hauling in dead pines, or green one foot to two feet in diameter and setting upright in the ground. A colony of woodpeckers and sapsuckers is worth much to an orchard.

Historically, reports of sapsuckers that specify “Yellow-bellied” in the region are sparse. In the late 1800s, Leverett Loomis noted the “Yellow-bellied Woodpecker” as “very common” in winter in Chester County. Elmer Brown recorded a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker in Salisbury on January 2, 1922. Fortunately, this species was regularly recorded on Christmas Bird Counts in the region from 1936 onward. One Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was recorded on a field trip in Charlotte led by Roxie Collie Simpson on October 17, 1943. In 1944, Elizabeth Clarkson noted



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker feeding from “drilled” holes. (Will Stuart)

it as a winter resident in Charlotte that is present from 28 September through 18 April. Rhett Chamberlain observed a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker drilling a hole in a small maple tree in Matthews, NC, on February 2, 1952. He reported this bird was chased away by a Purple Finch that flew down and began feeding, presumably drinking the free-flowing sap from the newly dug hole.

The closest known breeding site of Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers to our region is a small population of “Appalachian” Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers that breed in higher elevation deciduous forests in the mountains of Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia. A special working group was formed at the turn of the

twenty-first century to monitor this breeding population. John Gerwin, curator of ornithology with the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences, helped direct this project and established a survey protocol for volunteers. Nest sites were monitored, nestlings were banded and some telemetry work has taken place. It appears this population is ecologically distinct from the breeding populations in the North and that it needs conservation assistance. Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers that winter in this part the Carolina Piedmont are believed to be from northern breeding populations and not this disjunct breeding group.