

Species Profile — Lewis's Woodpecker (*Melanerpes lewis*)

by Andrew Mackie

The Lewis's Woodpecker is a true western native, found only in the Western United States and Canada. This colorful woodpecker was named for Meriwether Lewis. Captain Lewis first described the species in 1805 during the Corps of Discovery. Lewis described the woodpecker in his journal, but it would not be named until a few years later by the father of American Ornithology, Alexander Wilson. Wilson described the species from skins collected by the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Unlike many of our other woodpeckers, Lewis's are not black and white. They are a diverse palette of color, with green, black, gray, pink, and red. Both sexes have similar plumage. No other North American woodpecker resembles the Lewis's.

Lewis's Woodpeckers have a host of interesting habits. Not very woodpecker-like, Lewis's undertake prolonged gliding and aerial insect feeding. They seldom excavate trees for wood-boring insects. The species feeds on a variety of foods that can vary depending on availability. Major insects in the diet include ants, bees, wasps, beetles, and



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Lewis's Woodpecker on a feeder near Salida, CO.

grasshoppers. Acorns and other nuts can be a major food source, and are often stored for later use. Lewis's eat a variety of cultivated and wild fruit, including apples and crabapples. Another food source is wild seeds and several cultivated grains. Lewis's do occasionally come to bird feeding stations.

Like most woodpeckers, Lewis's need standing dead or partially dead trees for nesting. Throughout their range in the West, the species

uses different habitats, including open riparian woodland with cottonwoods, open ponderosa pine forest, and burned or logged pine forest. Lewis's have also used pinyon-juniper, pine-fir, oak forest, orchards, and some agricultural habitats. In Central Colorado, mature cottonwood

stands seem to be the predominate breeding habitat. Such habitat is in decline across most of the State due to changes in land use, invasive species, and the alteration of the hydrology of rivers and streams. One study (Snyder and Miller, 1991) found that in the lower Arkansas River and the South Platte, surface area of cottonwoods declined 31 percent and 9 percent, respectively.

Overall, Lewis's Woodpecker has a scattered distribution in the West, considered uncommon overall. Even when considered locally common, these populations can vary dramatically year to year. In the northern part of the range, they migrate south or move down to a lower elevation. Here in Central Colorado, the population is divided between migrating and overwintering. The Salida Christmas Bird Count has reported Lewis's Woodpecker three times in the last twelve years.

Due to an overall patchy distribution and declining populations, Lewis's are a species of conservation concern. The species is on the National Audubon Society's and American Bird Conservancy's Watchlists, 2014 State of the Birds Watchlist, the Intermountain West Joint Venture Priority Species List, and the British Columbia Blue List. Conservation measures include managing for the retention of snags in suitable habitat, preserving mature cottonwood trees, and managing for open, parklike habitat in ponderosa pine forest. The Land Trust of the Upper Arkansas is using the Lewis's Woodpecker to help guide conservation and management of riparian habitat in Central Colorado. This includes developing a sightings database to help identify important nesting and wintering habitat. The effort will also help to add to understanding of Lewis's Woodpecker ecology, leading to additional conservation strategies for the species.



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