

SKELTAL REMAINS OF THE NORTHERN FLICKER WITH A GROSS BILL DEFORMITY DISCOVERED IN A POPLAR TREE CAVITY

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A male Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus cafer*) with a gross bill deformity visited my feeders in McLure, British Columbia, from January 2003 to October 2004. The woodpecker arrived at my feeders with an obvious bill deformity and over the course of the next 760 days the bill continued to grow in length and curve downward. Both mandibles became weak and floppy hampering its ability to successfully ingest food. The last sighting of the Northern Flicker was in late October 2004, when it was observed successfully drinking from a neighbour's bird bath (Lidstone 2004). The fate of this woodpecker was unknown.

On 30 April 2006, gale force winds travelling northward from Kamloops up the North Thompson valley wreaked havoc on trees, hurling branches and cones to the ground. Succumbing to the relentless winds was an old balsam poplar tree (*Populus balsamifera*) that had been a fixture in our front yard for 15 years. For the last five years the tree has been on the verge of death and had only been spared the chainsaw because it was such a well used wildlife tree. Countless woodpeckers, chickadees, sapsuckers, starlings, and nuthatches had carved and used the dozens of cavities in the aging trunk.

When the poplar tree crashed to the ground, my husband decided to cut the trunk into manageable sections with a chainsaw. When the tree was upright we had observed Red-naped Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus nuchalis*) activity in one of the cavities so my husband was very careful to avoid cutting through any of the cavities. This proved to be a nearly impossible task; there were just so many holes. On the third cut, as branches and catkins rained all around, a flurry of feathers fell out from the hollowed trunk. Looking closer at the opening he noticed a skull but the worsening weather drove him indoors before he could identify what type of animal it was.

Early the next morning we immediately headed

to the downed poplar for a closer inspection. By some stroke of luck, my husband had cut just at the right height, and flush with the chainsaw cuts, face down in the cavity was the skull of a bird. As I gently pulled the skeletal remains through the opening I could hardly contain my excitement. I just knew what I was about to find. I had to stop and regain my composure before I could continue until my husbands excited encouragement brought me back to reality. Inside, covered in dust, dirt, cobwebs, woodchips, and surrounded by its own feathers, was the remains of "my flicker" (Figure 1).

The only damage to the flicker's skeleton was that the lower mandible was detached. This may have been caused when I removed it from the cavity or from the force of the poplar tree crashing to the ground, or even from struggling to free itself from this eventual tomb.

Once the skeleton was cleared of debris I took several photos and measurements to document this event. In my published report on this flicker I stated the bill to be approximately 15 to 18 cm in length, a visual guesstimate from several metres away. With the bird now in hand (Figure 2), the upper mandible measured 15.2 cm and the lower mandible 14.6 cm. There is a severe 'S' bend in the flicker's neck leading to the assumption that the back of the head was jammed on one side of the cavity and the bill tips lodged in to the other.

The flicker chose a cavity facing east, only 2 m from the ground and the entrance measured 6.4 cm in width by 10.2 cm in length. The inside dimensions of the cavity ranged from 14 cm at the top and widened to 19 cm at the base. The overall length of the cavity, from the bottom of the entrance to the base, was 30 cm. Beneath this base was 15 cm of solidly packed pine needles and extremely fine soil.

After searching for the flicker's remains since my last observation in the autumn of 2004, it was a humbling experience to know it was only 15 meters from where I had last sighted it. I have walked past that tree dozens of times in the past two years. I never heard the flicker utter a sound and so its life seemed a silent struggle and it was obvious its death was as well.

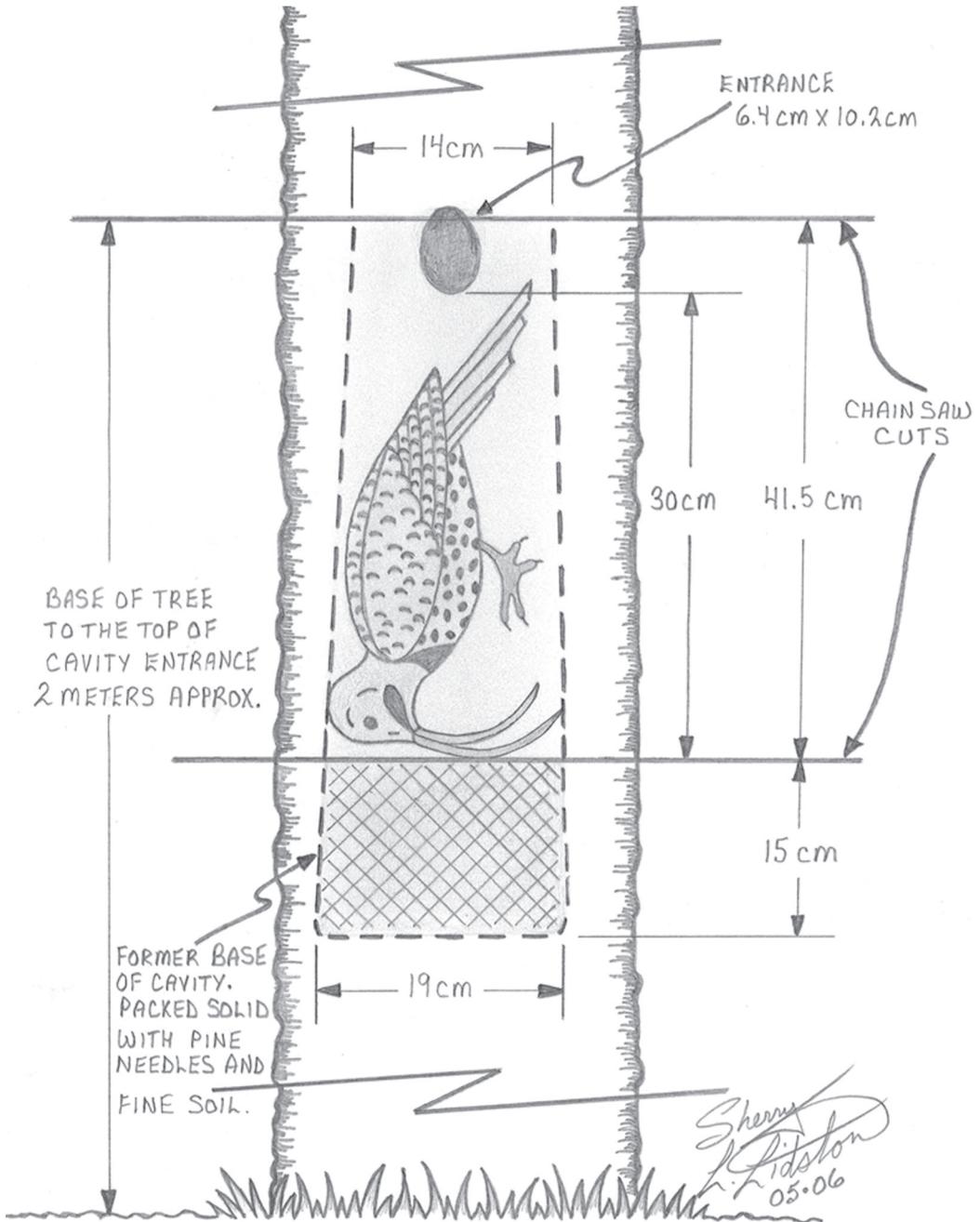


Figure 1. Author's drawing of the Northern Flicker depicting the position of the bird and where it ultimately died in a poplar tree cavity in McLure, BC. 29 April 2006. BC Photo 3299.



Figure 2. Sherry Lidstone with aberrant Northern Flicker skeleton extracted from a tree cavity in McLure, BC. 29 April 2006. (R. Dale Lidstone).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank ‘everyone’ at *Wildlife Afield* for allowing me to share this unusual story.

Literature Cited

Lidstone, S.L. 2004. Gross bill deformity and longevity in a Northern Flicker. *Wildlife Afield* 1:62-64.

About the Author

Sherry Lidstone is a multi-medium avian artist living in the small community of McLure. She also wrote a regular column “*The Feather Factor*” for the North Thompson/Star Journal in Barriere.