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## Birds of Barrington: YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER

MOST OF THE NEO-TROPICAL migrants—the long-distance fliers that spend the non-breeding season in Central or South America—have left the Barrington area by October. But migration still continues, dominated by migrants that make shorter flights to their wintering grounds in the southern part of this country and places just beyond.

One such bird to keep alert for in October is a type of woodpecker, the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*). This species last passed through the Barrington area in April or early May, on the way to its northern breeding territory. April and October are the months I pay special attention to any medium-sized woodpecker, knowing that it might be a sapsucker.

If you have not actually seen the bird, you may well have seen tell-tale signs of its activity: horizontal bands of holes drilled into the trunks of trees, often hickories, ginkgos, and maples. Sapsuckers drill those holes to release sap which they consume with their brush-tipped tongue. The sap wells attract insects that become additional food both for the woodpeckers and for other insectivorous birds.

Often the sweet food sustains migrant stragglers whose fellow species have long since left.

The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker is easy to distinguish from other woodpeckers. Yes, it does have a pale yellowish belly, as the name implies, but that is often difficult to see as the bird, in typical woodpecker fashion, clings to a tree trunk. More prominent are the black and white barred back, the bold black and white head markings, and the long white stripe down the edge of the folded wing. Both males and females have red foreheads and the male, as most male woodpeckers do, has additional red feathers, in this case on the throat. Young fall migrants are mostly brown and white; the white wing stripe is the best clue.

It is fairly easy to identify sapsuckers by sound. They vocalize with a soft mewling, somewhat like a catbird. With their beaks, they hammer a stuttering rhythm on tree trunks as they chisel out sap wells.

In the Midwest, the breeding range for the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker extends from central Wisconsin north into the coniferous and deciduous forests of Canada. It breeds across Canada into Alaska and in parts of Pennsylvania, New

York, and New England states. But in Illinois, we get only brief glimpses of the species, as they head south now to their winter range in the southern United States and Mexico, and again in April when they return north to breed.

Locally, during their migration, it's possible to spot a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker anywhere there are trees—in nature reserves like Baker's Lake or Flint Creek Savannas, parks, your own yard, even the streets of Barrington. Unlike with the Downy, Hairy, and Red-bellied Woodpeckers we can expect to see all winter, you have only two annual windows of opportunity with sapsuckers. So, keep your eyes and ears open! U



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