

Observations of a Hairy Woodpecker Pair in a River Forest backyard

by Jill Anderson

If Dutch Elm Disease has a silver lining, it involves Hairy Woodpeckers (*Picoides villosus*). After elm trees in my neighborhood began dying, a pair of Hairy Woodpeckers established a local territory, allowing me close-up, year-round views of their behavior. In spring 2004, their second year of local nesting, I recorded my observations and researched their behavior. The following is a synopsis of what I learned while studying the Hairy Woodpecker pair.

Dutch Elm Disease reached epidemic levels in the Midwest in the 1960s, and, as a result, the subtle and previously unrecognized differences in feeding behavior of male and female Hairy Woodpeckers became evident (Kilham 1965). Kilham's (1965) observation that female Hairy Woodpeckers favored the disease-causing bark-beetles, while male Hairy Woodpeckers (and other bird species) rarely fed on dying elms, led to a systematic study of Hairy Woodpecker feeding behavior. It is now known that female Hairy Woodpeckers feed quickly and superficially, by pecking or scaling bark to reach smaller prey, while male Hairy Woodpeckers feed at a slower and deeper pace, excavating larger prey from tunnels of one-fourth inch or more (Kilham 1965).

According to Kilham (1966), female Hairy Woodpeckers occupy their breeding territory in the fall, and take the lead in winter courtship when the male enters her territory in January. They form long-term and



Hairy Woodpecker photo taken in Illinois by Mary Kay Rubey.

affectionate bonds, with courtship activity prominent in the winter months (Kilham 1960).

A female Hairy Woodpecker returned to my River Forest (Cook County) backyard feeders 19 December 2003 after an almost three month absence. She made her presence known by vocalizing and drumming on a dead branch, high in an elm tree. The male Hairy Woodpecker was first seen 31 December 2003. The pair then visited my yard together daily, but fed at different feeders. Apart from vocalizations to one another, no particular closeness was noted

between them until 17 January 2004. After that, and lasting into late April, their backyard courtship displays were difficult to miss. As is typical with Hairy Woodpeckers (but unlike Downy Woodpeckers), their courtship was prolonged, vocal, and highly visible. It involved a variety of displays and interactions. The male and female chased each other around tree trunks, and from tree-to-tree, with much posturing and bill-waving.

The male selected a drumming tree on the edge of my property. His repeated, daily drumming was loud enough to prompt inquiries from neighbors two houses away. The drumming started about an hour after sunrise. Although my work schedule prevented me from consistent observations,

the drumming seemed to be particularly persistent on sunny days. The female often called to the male from a diseased elm tree approximately 25 feet from his drumming tree. She, too, would drum occasionally, and the male often responded by briefly joining her on the elm tree. Although they fed on different trees, the pair stayed in the same vicinity of one another and called to each other frequently. The male Hairy Woodpecker drilled numerous holes in his drumming tree, while the female scaled bark on the dying elm tree. They were also frequent visitors to a shelled peanut feeder in my backyard.

The Hairy Woodpeckers were observed together until 8 May 2004. After that, they visited the yard sep-