

# THE PRACTICED EYE

by *Kenn Kaufman*



*Female Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, with all-white throat. Its back is in shadow, hiding the typical pale spangling there. Photo/Olin S. Pettingill, Jr. VIREO (p03/1/309)*



*Male Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, showing classic nape and back patterns. Photo/J.R. Woodward. VIREO (w04/7/068)*

## Red-naped Sapsucker and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

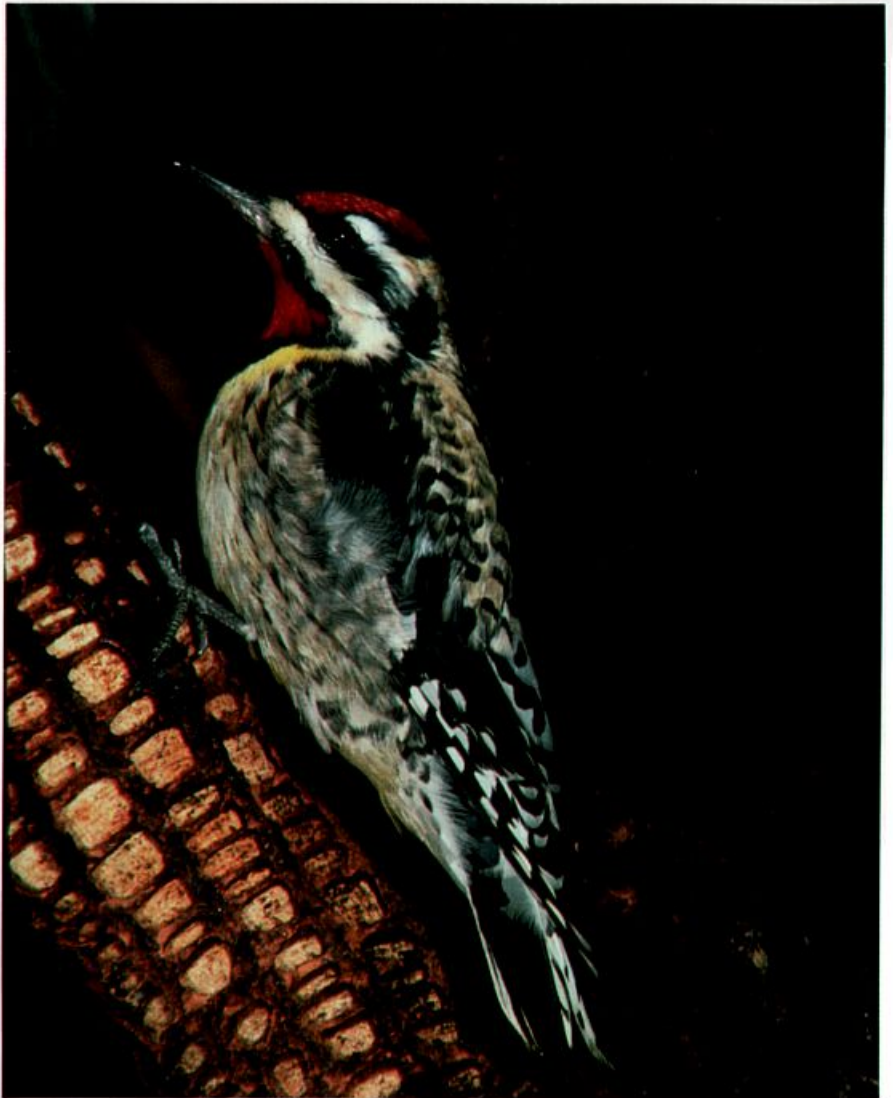
*photographs from VIREO*

The pendulum of bird taxonomy seems to swing back and forth from periods when forms are being “lumped” to periods when they are being “split.” As recently as the early 1970s, the lumpers were clearly in the saddle, and many old familiar birds lost their status as full species—for example, Baltimore and Bullock’s orioles, Myrtle and Audubon’s warblers, and a plethora of flickers, rosy finches, and juncos. More recently, the splitters have gained the upper hand. Pacific Loon, Clark’s Grebe, Yellow-footed Gull, Western Screech-Owl, and others have been raised to full species status, and several other splits are coming soon (golden-plovers, gnatcatchers, brown towhees, solitary vireos, and western flycatchers, to name a few).

With these swings in opinion occurring so often, the best course for field observers would be to keep track of all the recognizable forms (regardless of whether or not the current whim regards them as full species). After all, these well-marked races have their own patterns of distribution, and their own roles in the living diversity that the National Audubon Society strives to protect. But unfortunately, it's all too easy to fall into the rut of looking for only those birds that are "countable" on life lists—*i.e.*, full species only.

One taxonomic move in the 1980s yielded a bonanza for the listers: the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was split three ways. One member of the resulting trio had been noticed by birders for some time: the Red-breasted Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus ruber*) of the Pacific Northwest, which was hard to miss, since its head is entirely red. But the other two are much more similar to each other. They are the Red-naped Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus nuchalis*) of the Rocky Mountain and Great Basin regions, and the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*), the name now being applied in a more restricted sense to a bird found mostly in the North and East. This *Practiced Eye* focusses on the problem of telling Red-naped and Yellow-bellied sapsuckers apart.

What's in a name? Sometimes, less than we might hope for. With the west-



Male Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, showing broad white stripes on face, and thick black "frame" around red throat. Photo/J.R. Woodward. VIREO (w04/4/019)



Female Red-naped Sapsucker, with typical throat pattern. Photo: Dale and Marian Zimmerman/VIREO (z01/8/005)

ern member of this pair being called "Red-naped," many birders have assumed that nape color was the major field mark for separating the sapsuckers. Unfortunately, it is not reliable by itself. Red-naped Sapsucker sometimes *doesn't* have red on the nape—this is especially frequent in females, and especially in summer, when their plumage is rather worn. More disturbingly, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker sometimes *does* have a little red on its mostly white nape. So to identify these birds with confidence, we have to look at other field marks as well.

Adult females can usually be recognized by their throat patterns. The female Yellow-bellied has a white throat, enclosed by a black "frame" that is created by black malar stripes connected

to a black chest patch. The female Red-naped is typically bicolored within the black frame, with the lower half of the throat red, the upper throat and chin white.

Males of both species have the throat completely red, but there is a difference in the extent of this color. Yellow-bellied has a relatively limited patch of red, enclosed by a well-defined frame of black. On Red-naped, the red throat area invades the surrounding black: it extends down onto the chest, and spreads up into the malar region to break up that part of the black frame and even smear into the white stripe on the face.

A complication is raised by some female Red-naped that have more than half the throat red. Occasionally, the



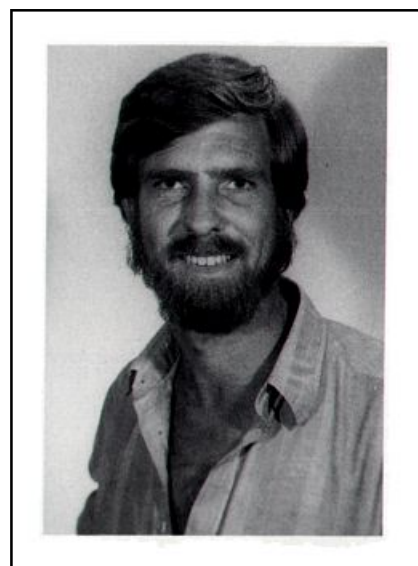
Male Red-naped Sapsucker captured for banding. The extensive red on the throat is typical. Photo/Rick Bowers.



Red-naped Sapsucker. On this freshly-molted bird, some of the black on the face is obscured by pale feather tips. The throat is mostly red, but the white on the chin suggests that this bird is probably a female; notice that no red is visible on the nape at this angle. Photo/Dale and Marian Zimmerman. VIREO (z01/8/002)

red may extend up almost to the bill, leaving just a spot of white on the chin. Superficially these females appear to have the male's throat pattern, except that the red does not spread as far out to the sides or down onto the chest; in these cases, without a careful study, a female Red-naped might be mistaken for a male Yellow-bellied Sapsucker.

Back pattern is worth a look. On Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, the black back is liberally spotted or spangled with white, yellow, or buff. On Red-naped the light markings are more restricted, concentrated in a narrow strip down either side of the back. A more subtle, but related, point is that the white stripes on the face are usually *broader* on Yellow-bellied than on Red-naped. These differences in the amount of light area on the back and face are hard to measure, but they add up to a total look that is often blacker on Red-naped, often paler or more "frosted" on Yellow-bellied Sapsucker.



VIREO (Visual Resources for Ornithology), at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, is the world's first and foremost scientifically-curated collection of bird photographs. Established in 1979, the collection now holds more than 100,000 images, representing well over one-third of the world's bird species. For more background, see the feature on VIREO by J.P. Myers *et al.* in *American Birds* Volume 38, Number 3, May-June 1984.