

THE FLINT-BILLED WOODPECKER

BY GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON

THE Flint-billed Woodpecker (*Phloeocoastes guatemalensis*) has been widely known as the Guatemalan Ivory-bill; but since it is neither very closely related to the true Ivory-bills of the genus *Campephilus*, nor by any means restricted to the republic of Guatemala, a new name seems to be needed. Wetmore has said of the species: "These are strong-muscled, robust birds with tough, thick skins, so that their preparation as specimens entails definite physical labor. A needle will scarcely penetrate the thickened skin of the back of the head" (1943. *Proc. U. S. Natl. Mus.*, 93:272). In one of my early notebooks appears a statement, not wholly in jest, to the effect that a good name for the bird would be Thick-skinned Woodpecker.

The Flint-bill ranges from Panamá northward throughout tropical Central America and México to southeastern Sonora in the west and to central Tamaulipas in the east. Along the Laredo-to-Mexico City highway I have seen it repeatedly as far north as Victoria and Guemes, Tamaulipas. I have never seen it on the Mesa de Llera proper, but in the well-wooded valleys below the mesa it is fairly common. In the northern part of its range it probably does not reach elevations above 2000 feet.

It is about 14½ inches long. Adult and immature birds of both sexes are crested. The adult male's entire head is red. In the female the pileum and throat are black, while the nostril feathers, fore part of the chin, and sides of the head are red. In nestling males the crest proper is red, but the front half of the crown and most of the head are dusky. In young females the upper part of the crest is black, the lower part red. As for the neck and body, these are largely black in all plumages; but a broad white line down each side of the neck connects with a narrow white shoulder stripe; the breast and belly are barred with light grayish buff; and the wing linings are pale yellow. This yellow seems especially bright when the sun's rays are nearly horizontal. In adults the bill is flinty gray at the base, grayish white toward the tip, the eyes pale yellow, the skin around the eyes dark gray.

For a long time I thought that the Flint-bill was voiceless; but on May 29, 1947, along the Río Sabinas in Tamaulipas, I happened upon a family group—a young female, well able to fly, and its parents. The adult birds gave a loud note of protest which I jotted down as *keck* or *kack* (Sutton, 1950. *Bird-Banding*, 21:49). The species' most characteristic "sound," however, is an incisive double-rap, a sort of abbreviated drumming, sometimes given in chorus. Such a chorus Mr. and Mrs. Robert J. Newman, Mr. and Mrs. Richard R. Graber, Charles Shaw, and I heard in the late afternoon on January 8,



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(*Phloeocoastes guatemalensis regius*)

Adult male, life-size, sketched February 16, 1938, along the Río Corona, near the village of Güemes, Tamaulipas, México, by George Miksch Sutton. This is the second of a series of eight color plates honoring the memory of Dr. David Clark Hilton.

1952, in the vicinity of Rancho Sabinal, west of Aquismon, San Luis Potosí. A single bird, a male, in a tree near the old hacienda in which we were living, continued to give the double-rap from one spot (about 30 feet from the ground) for about three-quarters of an hour, and we heard what seemed to be answering double-raps, but no *vocal* Flint-bill utterance, from a dozen directions during the same period.

The flight of the Flint-bill is undulatory, though usually not deeply so. The bird is energetic in its feeding. With its powerful bill it hacks away at the bark and dead wood.

The nest is excavated by both the female and the male. On March 1, 1938, while on a riverbank trail near Gómez Farías, Tamaulipas, I heard the dull *puck, puck*, of a woodpecker at work above me. When the bird finally backed out so that I could see it, I perceived that it was a female Flint-bill. A loud double-rap from her served to summon the male, who went to work promptly, though for some reason he did not wholly disappear within the cavity. Occasionally he backed out completely to toss a billful of chips into the air. In 1941, members of the Cornell University—Carleton College Expedition found two nests—one (partly finished) half-way up the mountain just west of the Río Sabinas, near Gómez Farías, about 1500 feet elevation, April 12; the other, finished but empty, about fifteen feet from the ground in a leaning dead tree very close to the river, April 30 (Sutton and Pettingill, 1942. *Auk*, 59:19). I have never seen the eggs.

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