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RED-NAPED AND RED-BREASTED SAPSUCKERS

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The classification of the Yellow-bellied (*Sphyrapicus varius*), Red-naped (*S. nuchalis*), and Red-breasted (*S. ruber*) sapsuckers has confounded ornithologists since the late 1800s, a situation that spurred prodigious field and laboratory research during the past half-century aimed at elucidating relationships between these closely related taxa. The American Ornithologists' Union has recognized these three as species since 1985, citing the findings and conclusions of Johnson and Zink (1983). Here we consider relationships between *nuchalis* and *ruber*, sister species that are—intuition aside—more closely related to each other than either is to *varius* (Johnson and Zink 1983, Cicero and Johnson 1995). In addition to the scientific literature touched upon in this brief review, useful identification resources and overviews include Devillers (1970), DeBenedictis (1970), Dunn (1978), Kaufmann (1990), Lehman (1991), Pyle (1997), and Sibley (2000).

The Red-naped Sapsucker breeds in the Rocky Mountains, the eastern Cascades, and mountains of the Great Basin. The Red-breasted Sapsucker's northern subspecies, *S. r. ruber*, breeds from southeastern Alaska to southern Oregon, and apparently interbreeds extensively with southern *S. r. daggetti* in extreme southwestern Oregon and extreme northwestern California (Howell 1952). The breeding range of *S. r. daggetti* extends south to Marin County, across to northeastern California and south-central Oregon, and down through the Sierra Nevada, recurring in the high mountains of southern California (American Ornithologists' Union 1957, 1988).

The border between *S. r. ruber* and *S. nuchalis* traces the peaks of the Cascade Range north to central British Columbia, and mixing of these taxa "appears to be extremely scarce" (Howell 1952:268). Contact zones for *S. r. daggetti* and *S. nuchalis* have proven to be rather dynamic over the past century (Scott et al. 1976, Johnson and Johnson 1985), with two main zones of sympatry currently recognized. One encompasses parts of Modoc County, California, and adjacent Lake and Klamath counties, Oregon (Howell 1952). Examining 145 pairs in this area, Johnson and Johnson (1985) concluded that 18% of the studied pairs included at least one backcrossed individual, with interspecific breeding accounting for another 6%. The second zone of sympatry includes parts of eastern Mono County, California, and adjacent Lyon and Mineral counties, Nevada (Johnson and Johnson 1985), an area where interbreeding is "apparently very slight" (Howell 1952:251). At five additional known sites, *nuchalis* and *daggetti* are considered "essentially allopatric" by reason of one taxon being common and the other rare (Johnson and Johnson 1985). Otherwise, the Sierra Nevada is *daggetti* country, while *nuchalis* claims the Great Basin and Rockies; hybridization occurs in the areas of allopatry but is considered rare (Howell 1952; Johnson and Johnson 1985).

Both Red-breasted and Red-naped sapsuckers undergo prebasic molts on the breeding grounds. First-year Red-breasteds typically complete this molt by September, occasionally retaining some juvenal body feathers through December, and first-year Red-naped are about a month behind this schedule (Pyle 1997). Feathers of the lower throat appear to be the last to be replaced in both species (Howell 1952). Thus, birds seen in migration should be in fresh plumage (or mostly so). This is an important consideration, since the middle and basal portions of the head and chest feathers of all *daggetti* possess melanin pigment (Howell 1952), and wearing away of red feather tips normally reveals "an underlying 'shadow' that is reminiscent of the melanistic

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breast band, cheek patch, and head stripes seen so vividly in *nuchalis*" (Johnson and Johnson 1985:4). The latter authors developed a 13-step "hybrid series index" that progresses from extreme *daggetti* (score 0) to extreme *nuchalis* (score 12), illustrating even "pure" *daggetti* with conspicuous black splotches on the upper breast; this apparently reflects the birds' appearance in summer, when body and head feathers are subject to considerable wear from attending to the nest and young. Note that Kaufman (1990) highlighted such blotches as an important feature of intermediate plumages, apparently because fall and winter Red-breasted Sapsuckers normally have unmarked red breasts.

Red-naped Sapsuckers winter in the southwestern U. S. from southern Nevada and southeastern California through central New Mexico, in western Mexico as far south as Jalisco, and throughout the Baja California peninsula (American Ornithologists' Union 1998). On the coastal slope of California, they are uncommon in San Diego County (Unitt 1984), become progressively rarer north to Santa Barbara County (Lehman 1994), and are very rare north of there to southern Oregon (American Ornithologists' Union 1998). Red-breasted Sapsuckers occupy a much smaller winter range along the Pacific slope from southeastern Alaska to northern Baja California, only occasionally straying into interior desert areas. Observers should be especially careful when identifying *daggetti* east of its normal range, as in Arizona, since many such claims involve hybrids (Rosenberg 1990, P. E. Lehman in litt.).

In mid-October 2001, while traversing White Pine and Lincoln counties in east-central Nevada, Dunn encountered approximately eight Red-naped Sapsuckers, four apparent hybrids, and no Red-breasted Sapsuckers. Observer coverage in this part of Nevada is light, but these numbers are consistent with Dunn's previous experience in the eastern deserts and the Great Basin. In the western and central parts of northern Baja California, where the normal ranges of Red-naped and Red-breasted sapsuckers overlap, the Red-naped is uncommon but outnumbers both the Red-breasted and hybrids—which are about equally rare—by ratios of about 5:1 (Erickson et al. 2001).

Dunn photographed the left-hand bird shown on the back cover of this issue on 13 October 2001 at Panamint Springs, Inyo County, California. Brian Small captured the other image during the month of October at Galileo Hill, Kern County, California. The birds' ages are uncertain, although both appear consistent with their first year. Neither is a "pure" Red-naped Sapsucker as both have too much red on their faces and show little or no trace of black frames on their throats. Unlike typical Red-breasted Sapsuckers, both birds have red pigment concentrated in the throat rather than spreading across the upper breast. Some dark feathering appears to be present below the right-hand bird's throat, with limited splotches of red below, as would be expected in an intermediate plumage, so this bird seems to be a fairly straightforward Red-naped \times Red-breasted hybrid. Although the left-hand bird does not show obvious black splotching around the throat, its intermediate facial pattern and concentration of red in the throat, with only limited red below that, suggest another hybrid.

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