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Figure 1. Female Ladder-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides scalaris*) photographed on 23 February 2008, in Stockdale Park, Riley County, Kansas. Lowell B. Johnson

### EXTRALIMITAL LADDER-BACKED WOODPECKER OF APPARENT EXTENDED LONGEVITY IN RILEY COUNTY, KANSAS

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The Ladder-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides scalaris*) is nonmigratory and is typically found in the arid deserts of the southwestern United States and northern Mexico (Lowther 2001). Its usual habitat includes brush, mesquite, and cactus (Lowther 2001). Given this habitat preference, its occurrence in Kansas is largely limited to the southwestern portion of the state, with reports of nesting in Morton County (Thompson and Ely 1989, Cable *et al.* 1996), and observations in Clark, Ford, Grant, Hamilton and Seward Counties (Thompson and Ely 1989, Otte 2008). Elsewhere in the state, there are additional single sightings in Sedgwick and Linn Counties (Janzen 2007, Otte 2008).

My initial report of its occurrence in Riley County on 30 September 2001, was therefore noteworthy, and was reported on the Kansas Bird List (KSBIRD-L@LISTSERV.KSU.EDU, Johnson 2001). It was later reported to the Kansas Bird Records Committee (KBRC), which accepted the record (Rintoul 2002, KBRC #2001-55), the first for Riley County.

The bird was a female, as shown by the absence of red on the head (Figure 1). Its cleanly barred back, flanks and outer tail feathers and its facial pattern with black interconnected malar and eye stripes eliminated other similar species. It was discovered along the Stockdale Park Road, by a cattle enclosure about a mile to the east of the T-intersection with Blue River Hills Road, Riley County. This location is nearly 300 miles from its closest reported nesting site in Kansas (Thompson and Ely 1989, Cable *et al.* 1996). It was in the company of a Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*), and was feeding in a thornless honey locust tree (*Gleditsia triacanthos inermis*) bordering the enclosure. A number of locust trees in this area were showing a crown die-back and supported a population of insects attractive to various woodpecker species

each fall when subsequent observations were made. Over the next seven years these trees became a favored location for many additional sightings of what is presumed to be the same bird. As noted in the committee report (Rintoul 2002), Louise Jahnke observed the bird near the cattle enclosure several weeks earlier than my sighting (date unknown). As also reported, I briefly saw what I presume to be the same female in that area on 27 October 2001, again in the company of several Downy Woodpeckers. My last sighting during this year was on 29 November 2001.

I know of no additional observations of a Ladder-backed Woodpecker in Riley County until 8 February 2003, when I observed a female, presumably the same one, in the same tree where the one was first sighted in 2001. Jethro Runco also saw and heard a female in the same area accompanied by a Downy Woodpecker on 7 March 2003 (KBRC #2003-11, Otte 2004), and I also noted both species there on the following day. On 7 June 2003, I briefly observed a female Ladder-backed Woodpecker at a different Stockdale Cove location. This bird was seen along the loop road by the restrooms uphill from the campground, approximately 1.5 miles from the earlier sightings. I also spotted what is presumably the same bird on 6 October 2003 and 20 November 2003 near the cattle enclosure. In the latter observation, the bird was being aggressively pursued by a Downy Woodpecker of undetermined gender.

On 3 January 2004, I again got a brief look at a female Ladder-backed Woodpecker in a tree across the clearing from the cattle enclosure. On 12 May 2004, I observed it by the cattle enclosure, this time in the presence of a male Downy Woodpecker. When the Downy Woodpecker flew off, the Ladder-backed Woodpecker followed him and I could not relocate them. On 12 September 2004, I observed a female Ladder-backed Woodpecker feeding in the same row of locust trees in which it was first spotted in 2001. Ted Cable also briefly observed a Ladder-backed Woodpecker of unreported gender in the same area on 1 December 2004.

On 16 January 2005, Doris Burnett observed a female Ladder-backed Woodpecker at a location between the cattle enclosure and restroom sites. The bird was in shrubs and on the ground for an extended period of time, first in the presence of a Downy Woodpecker and later with a Hairy Woodpecker (*Picoides villosus*). On 22 February 2005, Jim Shroyer and I spotted a female Ladder-backed Woodpecker, again in the presence of a Downy Woodpecker, in a dead tree located across the bridge to the east of the cattle pen. There were no further reported sightings of the bird until 9 December 2006, when I obtained a poor quality, albeit identifiable, photograph near the restroom pull-off, uphill from the campground.

The next reported sightings, both of females, were on 9 February 2008, when I observed the bird near the loop road just past the restrooms, and several hours later when Cory Gregory took definitive photographs of the bird between the restrooms and the campground. I also photographed the bird on 23 February 2008 (Figure 1). Brandon Magette also saw what is presumed to be the same female near the restrooms on 27 February 2008. The last reported sighting of a female Ladder-backed Woodpecker in Riley County to date was on 15 March 2008 between the cattle pen and campground sites, near the open-air picnic pavilion on the south side of the road, where the bird was feeding in the weeds, as observed by Pete Janzen.

In summary, I have documented at least 22 sightings of what is presumed to be the same Ladder-backed Woodpecker, always a female where identification of sex was possible, over the last 7.5 years. None of the sightings were of birds with observable red on the head, as is exhibited by adult males or juveniles of both sexes (Lowther 2001). All were in an area along a portion of the Stockdale Park Road of about 1.5 miles in length. Although most observations were either near the cattle pen or campground areas, there were occasional reports of sightings in intermediate locations. Two individuals were never seen together, or at the cattle enclosure and restroom sites on the same day. For the aforementioned reasons, as well as the unlikely

arrival of two female birds of this nonmigratory species to the same area, it is presumed that only a single bird is involved. Assuming these observations are all of one individual, the bird's life span is greater than 7.5 years, which is three years longer than is previously reported based on banding data (Lowther 2001).

The question of hybridization with either a Downy or Hairy Woodpecker must also be addressed. To date, the only reported hybridizations with Ladder-backed Woodpeckers have been with Nuttall's Woodpecker (*Picoides nuttalli*), and one with a Hairy Woodpecker (Miller 1955). There is no obvious evidence of hybridization with the Riley County bird (Figure 1). The distal connection between the black eye-line and malar stripe appears weak (see Figure 1) relative to what is frequently depicted in field guides (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2006). This could be influenced, however, by posture of the bird, molt, or feather wear.

In contrast, a single presumed F1 hybrid Ladder-backed Woodpecker x Hairy Woodpecker exhibited, among other modifications, a significant reduction in visible white markings and cross-barring of the back (Miller 1955), which this bird does not show. I know of no reports of hybridization between Ladder-backed and Downy Woodpeckers. However, given the similar color patterns of Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, one might anticipate that a hypothetical *P. scalaris* x *P. pubescens* hybrid would exhibit color pattern changes similar to the previously described *P. scalaris* x *P. villosus* hybrid. Thus, the bird shown in Figure 1 shows no definitive evidence of being a hybrid.

Given the frequent association of this female Ladder-backed Woodpecker with Downy Woodpeckers, and, to a lesser degree Hairy Woodpeckers, one wonders if local mating and/or hybridization have occurred. Irwin Hoogheem and Stephen Kitchel (pers. communication), in a single brief sighting, saw a female woodpecker that had head and outer retrice markings suggesting a Ladder-backed Woodpecker, but it lacked some of the expected extensive ladder markings on the back. They were unable to photographically document their sighting. This brief observation definitely raises the possibility of hybridization of the Stockdale Road bird with either of these species, and points out the need for further observations and documentation of all atypical plumaged *Picoides* woodpeckers encountered in this area.

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