



Northern Flicker

PHOTOS BY JAMES KENDALL,
ESSAY BY BETTY KANNE



Astonishing!!

That loud, repetitively piercing wicka-wicka-wicka call directs us to a large, distinctive forest bird showing dark breast polka-dots, an improbable black bib and a long, stiff, spikey tail veritably dripping in red! That “take-no-prisoners” dynamic upstart has most certainly returned!



Astonishing! is not a hyperbolic description but rather a quite sober appraisal of a truly magnificent woodpecker (yes, a woodpecker!) that abandons us each Spring to fly to its northern breeding grounds but then thankfully, most dutifully returns to overwinter in our own parks and backyards during our coldest and wettest months. Notably, the Northern Flicker is one of the few woodpecker species that migrates, making its fall return a highly anticipated event.



Roger Tory Peterson is credited as being the father of contemporary birding with the explosive publication in 1934 of the first practical, modern Bird Field Guide for the average citizen just walking through the woods. Bird-watching, or as we say today, Birding, was thus born. Hundreds of years of “shoot them, describe them, and then name them after yourself or a friend” had effectively ended.



As an eleven year old boy in 1920 wandering the vast, soon to be felled, old-growth forests of a bucolic northeastern New York, he chanced upon a large, “most wondrous bird”, that first appeared drab, frail and injured but at his concerned, tentative touch suddenly exploded colorfully forth to his most astonished wonder! A Northern Flicker!!

In that moment, young Roger Tory Peterson was utterly transformed. The artist, illustrator, author, and conservationist embraced the Northern Flicker as being his Spark Bird. It changed his life and served to change the direction of history.