Woodpecker

Ecology & Damage Management

Downy woodpecker – Wendy VanDyke Evans, Bugwood.org

Woodpeckers are attractive, interesting visitors to bird feeders and yards. In addition to adding beauty to the landscape, woodpeckers are an integral part of the ecosystem. Woodpeckers are primary cavity nesters, which means that they use their bills (and reinforced skull structure) to excavate holes into dead wood. Woodpeckers use the cavities they create for nesting and roosting, but a wide assortment of other animals (secondary cavity users) like squirrels, raccoons, bluebirds, and owls, to name a few, will enlarge and use the cavities woodpeckers have created and abandoned. Thus, woodpeckers provide habitat for a host of other species. In addition, they feed on a variety of insects, helping to keep those populations in check.

"Woodpeckers hammer for several reasons: to establish territory or find a mate; to excavate a nesting or roosting hole; or to dislodge insects hiding under bark or siding."

Although not everyone is familiar with their calls and vocalizations, most can recognize the sound a woodpecker makes as it raps on trees (or your house). In fact, woodpeckers not only can be identified by their calls, but by their drumming, because each species hammers with a different rhythm and intensity.

Woodpeckers hammer for several reasons: to establish territory or find a mate; to excavate a nesting or roosting hole; or to dislodge insects hiding under bark or siding. It is this aspect of woodpecker behavior that causes the most conflicts with humans, as woodpeckers do not necessarily distinguish between hammering on an oak tree and hammering on a house. Not only is the hammering annoying, especially when it occurs near sunrise, but it can also cause considerable damage.

Woodpeckers may hammer holes completely through the siding and insulation of a house. In some cases, they make holes large enough to provide nest sites for other birds, especially House sparrows. There have been reports of homes damaged to the point of needing complete residing. In other cases, woodpeckers have damaged almost every house in wooded, suburban developments. While woodpeckers can and do cause damage to utility poles, orchards, and forested areas, this publication is primarily aimed at reducing or eliminating woodpecker damage to buildings.

Jeffrey J. Strobel

Woodpecker damage to house siding.

DESCRIPTION

Wisconsin is currently home to eight woodpecker species. The Black-backed woodpecker is rare and not likely to cause much, if any, damage due to its limited numbers. Therefore, we have excluded them from the following species descriptions and this publication.

The following seven species are common, and all but the Yellow-bellied sapsucker can cause damage to homes and other wooden structures. However, the Downy, Hairy and Pileated woodpeckers are the species that most often cause damage.

Downy *(Picoides pubescens)* **and Hairy** *(Picoides villosus)* **Woodpeckers**

The Downy is the smallest species of woodpecker found in Wisconsin. It measures about 6 inches from head to tail. The Hairy woodpecker is generally about 3 inches larger. Both species have white backs, and black wings with white spots. Males have a patch of red feathers on the back of their heads. Because Downy and Hairy woodpeckers are easily confused due to similar size and markings, the identifying field mark is bill length relative to head size. Downy woodpecker bills are roughly half the length of their heads, while Hairy woodpecker bills are as long or slightly longer than their heads. These two species are found in Wisconsin year-round.

Red-headed woodpecker *(Melanerpes erythrocephalus)*

The Red-headed woodpecker is about 8 inches long and the only woodpecker in Wisconsin with a completely red head. It has a white breast and distinctly black and white back and wings. Red-headed woodpeckers are mostly summer residents, but can be found year-round in an increasing number of areas of the state. They are a species of concern in Wisconsin.

Pileated woodpecker *(Dryocopus pileatus)*

At 18 inches, the Pileated is the largest woodpecker species in Wisconsin. The Pileated is mostly black and has a crest of bright red feathers on top of its head. Black and white striping runs down the face and neck; this is more distinct in the male than in the female. Pileateds are year-round residents in Wisconsin.

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker *(Sphyrapicus varius)*

The Yellow-bellied sapsucker measures about 8 inches long and is distinguished by alternating lines of black and white feathers on the face, a red patch of feathers on the forehead, and an area of yellow feathers (hence the "Yellow-bellied") on the central part of the belly. Male sapsuckers have a red chin and females have a white chin. Sapsuckers are primarily summer residents of Wisconsin, although some may be found in southern Wisconsin year-round.

Red-bellied Woodpecker *(Melanerpes carolinus)*

The Red-bellied woodpecker is about 9 inches long and has a tan belly and black and white barred feathers on the tail, back, and wings. The lower abdomen may have a reddish blush, but this is sometimes difficult to see. Males have red feathers extending from the nape of the neck, across the central part of the head, and ending at the bill. Females have red feathering only on the nape of the neck with grey to tan feathering across the top of the head. Red-bellied woodpeckers are found in Wisconsin year-round.

Northern flicker *(Colaptes auratus)*

Northern flickers are 13 inches long, have black-spotted breasts and brown and black barred feathers on their backs and wings. The undersides of the wing and tail feathers are yellow. Flickers have a patch of red feathers at the nape of the neck and a distinctive white rump patch, easily seen when in flight. Flickers can be found year-round in Wisconsin.

Photos: Downy – David Cappaert, Michigan State University, Bugwood.org; Hairy – Donna Dewhurst; Red-headed – Dave Menke; Pileated – USDA Forest Service; Yellow-bellied sapsucker – James Solomon, USDA Forest Service, Bugwood.org; Red-bellied – Katherine Whittemore; Northern flicker – Dave Menke.

HABITS & HABITAT

Woodpeckers can be found in woodlands, farmland, suburban neighborhoods, parks, and orchards; really in any area containing trees. They are primarily insectivores, eating a variety of insects like larvae, wood-boring insects, ants, and beetles. It is common to see Northern flickers in the lawn feeding on ants, which make up nearly 50% of their diet. Other woodpeckers will catch flying insects in midair.

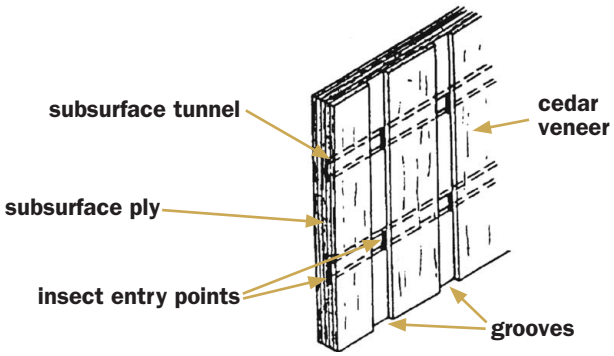
Other food items include nuts, seeds, fruit, and berries, and woodpeckers will often visit seed and suet feeders to supplement their diets. Red-headed and Red-bellied woodpeckers store and defend food caches for use at a later time. Yellow-bellied sapsuckers feed on sap from trees.

WHEN & WHY DO WOODPECKERS DAMAGE HOUSES?

Woodpecker damage may occur anytime of year but is most common in spring and fall, with more damage typically occurring in the spring. During spring, male woodpeckers hammer as a territorial activity, much like other birds sing to advertise their territory and attract a mate. Territorial hammering may also occur in fall, but spring hammering is more common and persistent.

In the wild, woodpeckers hammer on trees. But in residential areas some birds seem to prefer houses and aluminum siding. It has been suggested that woodpeckers are attracted to houses due to their wood (and sometimes aluminum) siding, large size, and better sound production, making houses seem like "super trees." Territorial hammering is usually concentrated in one spot and typically occurs on parts of the house that produce the greatest sound, like drain spouts and TV antennas.

Fall and winter damage often results from woodpeckers searching for food, usually insects or insect larvae, in or under the siding. Certain types of plywood siding contain tunnels, which are opened when the plywood is grooved (see diagram) to give the appearance of vertical boards. Insects, especially leaf-cutting bees, enter these tunnels to breed or to lay eggs. Several woodpeckers may feed on insects in plywood, but usually only one bird is involved in territorial hammering.



IDENTIFYING WOODPECKER DAMAGE

Often, you will see and or hear the woodpecker as it hammers on the object being damaged, thus providing the opportunity for positive visual identification. Nest cavity holes are nearly perfectly circular and are just large enough for the body of the adult woodpecker to fit through. Therefore, Downy woodpecker nesting holes are much smaller than entrances to nest cavities used by Pileated woodpeckers.

Holes created while looking for insects may be irregularly shaped, with the Pileated woodpecker creating the largest and deepest holes of any woodpecker species in Wisconsin.

The Yellow-bellied sapsucker, as its name implies, drills into trees to obtain sap. In Wisconsin, sapsuckers favor birch, maple and hemlock trees, but will also use other species. Orchard trees and a number of ornamentals may be damaged as well.

An individual sapsucker often picks a favorite tree and visits it frequently. Sapsucker damage is indicated by a diagonal pattern of evenly spaced small holes that may stretch all the way around a tree. These wounds can provide an easy entry point for insects or disease to invade the tree.

LEGAL STATUS

All woodpeckers in Wisconsin are considered non-game species and are protected by both state and federal laws. Killing a woodpecker without a permit from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service will result in a stiff fine. Permits for killing damage-causing woodpeckers are available. To obtain a permit application and more information, contact the United States Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services at (866) 4USDAWS (487-3297) or the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Migratory Bird Permit Office at (612) 713-5436. The time required to process a permit may vary, so ask when you apply. Once you have the permit, you may legally kill the woodpecker causing the damage.

CONTROLLING WOODPECKER DAMAGE

Recommended approaches to managing damage caused by woodpeckers are the same for all woodpecker species except for the Yellow-bellied sapsucker. Controlling sapsucker damage to trees is discussed in the section titled "Exclusion." Regardless of the woodpecker species causing the damage, the key to successful management is to take action as soon as a bird shows signs of becoming a pest. Once a bird establishes its behavior pattern, it will be much more difficult to stop. After the damage has been stopped and you are sure the woodpecker will not return, repair the area so other woodpeckers are not attracted to the damaged area.

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There are several options for coping with woodpecker damage. Depending upon why the bird has chosen a particular location, these may include: removing the attractant, or excluding, harassing, trapping, or shooting (with proper permits) the woodpecker(s).

Removing the attractant

If damage to buildings is a result of woodpeckers searching for food, you can solve the problem by removing the insects. Insects typically inhabit rotting wood. Even though the outside face of wood siding may appear in good condition, the side abutting the house may have become damp and started to decay. You may want to call a pest extermination company and have them provide a free estimate to determine if you have insect infestation in your wood siding. Caulk all visible holes, cracks, and other defects in the siding. Insecticides or wood preservatives may help in some situations, although getting an insecticide into the siding where it will kill the insects can be difficult. Treatment of the siding with toxic wood preservatives also seems to repel woodpeckers as well as providing insecticidal and wood care benefits. Check with your paint dealer about incorporating a wood preservative with a coat of stain or paint. If the siding needs paint, a heavy application of a thick latex-based product may clog the open grooves and provide some resistance to insect infestation.

To avoid insect and woodpecker problems when building in a wooded area, proactive measures should be taken when designing a building. Choosing a non-wood option, such as aluminum or vinyl siding, cement board, engineered wood siding, brick, stone, and stucco, may prevent at least some woodpecker problems. The color of a building may also be considered. A study in New York found that homes painted with earth-tone colored paints or stains experienced significantly more woodpecker damage than homes painted with bright white or pastel colors.

Exclusion

Preventing the bird from accessing and continuing to damage an area can be done using a variety of exclusion materials. The easiest and least expensive alternative is to cover the affected area with plastic bird netting. Netting is readily available at garden centers where it is sold to protect cherries, berries, and other crops from bird depredation. It comes in sheets or rolls, some large enough to cover the entire side of a house. The netting is usually black, nearly invisible from a distance and it is quite durable. The key to success with netting is to suspend it from a roofline, soffit,

or other overhang so that it stays a few inches away from the wood siding. If it is attached directly to the wood, the woodpeckers can simply hang onto it and peck through the mesh.

For smaller areas, hardware cloth (wire mesh less than 0.25-inch mesh size) or even sheet metal can be applied directly to the wood. Metal products can be painted to match the house color. It may take a while for the woodpeckers to stop visiting the damaged area, so plan to leave the exclusion material in place for 2-3 weeks. Sheet metal placed over an area that has suffered prolonged or chronic damage can be left in place indefinitely.

Damage to trees caused by yellow-bellied sapsuckers can be eliminated using wire mesh with a 0.25-inch mesh size. The wire mesh should be wrapped around the tree where the damage has occurred and affixed either to the tree or itself to hold it in place. If you plan on leaving the mesh in place for an extended period of time and the tree is still growing, you will need to periodically check that the mesh is not constricting the tree's diameter growth. Other exclusion materials like burlap, plastic sheeting, and sheet metal can be used but be aware that water can be trapped between the tree and the exclusion material, creating fungus issues. Also, insects may find refuge under certain exclusion materials and may damage the tree.

Vigilance is the key here. Be prepared to put up additional exclusion material if the bird(s) moves to another section of the building or tree where no exclusion material is present and begins to cause damage on a previously undamaged section.

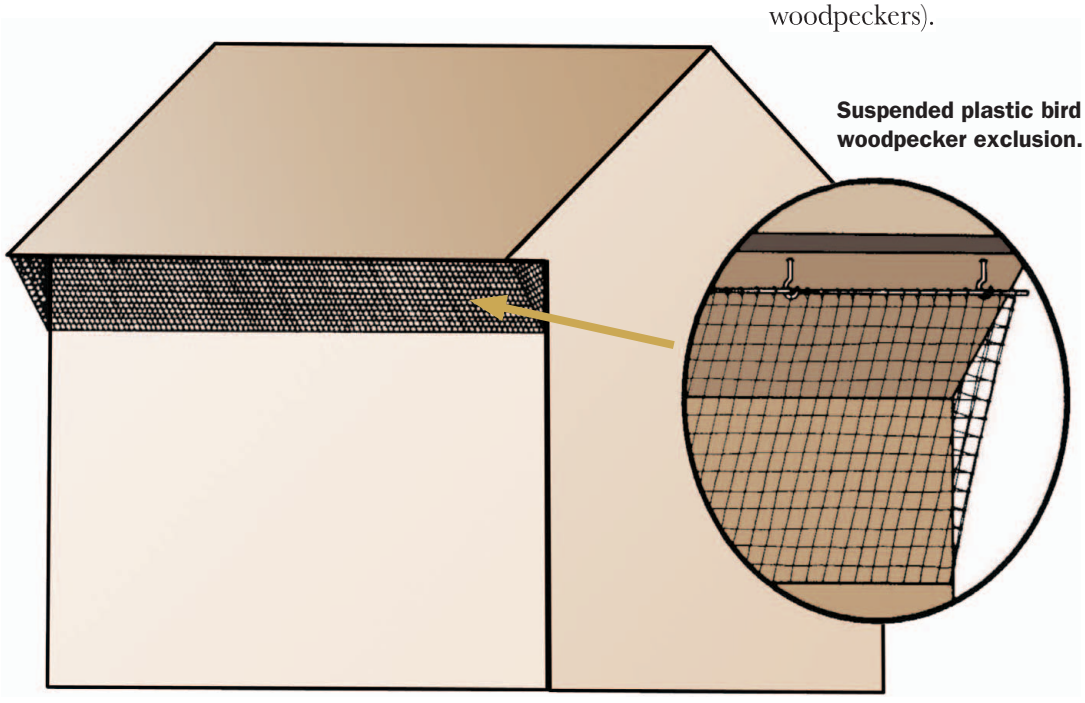
Harassment (Scaring)

Persistence is very important when using harassment techniques – you cannot frighten the bird away once and expect the problem to be solved. Harass or scare the bird whenever you see it on the house. You may need to do this multiple times every day for 2-3 weeks. Moving harassment devices regularly to different locations is more effective than leaving harassment devices in one place. To discourage a troublesome woodpecker, a combination of the following techniques is often more effective than one alone:

- Make loud noises – shoot cap guns, bang on pots and pans, or yell.
- Tack strips of aluminum foil or a child's pinwheel to the damaged area (the movement of the foil strips or pinwheel in the breeze will often deter woodpeckers).

Limiting Damage

A study in New York determined that a product called Irri-Tape® (similar to Mylar® tape or aluminum foil) that was strung in strips where woodpecker damage occurred reduced woodpecker damage 50% of the time.



Suspended plastic bird netting for woodpecker exclusion.

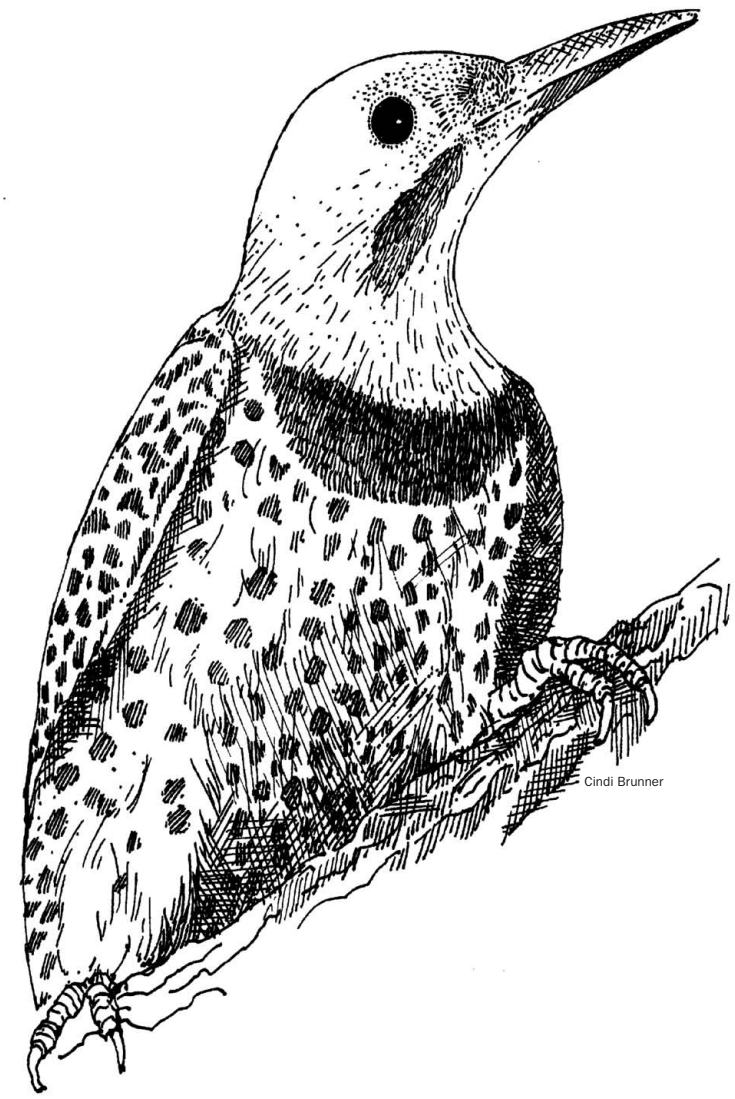
- Place a toy (rubber or plastic) snake, owl decoy (such as those used by crow hunters), or a cut-out silhouette of a hawk near the damaged area. If you don't have a convenient ledge or roof upon which to place decoys, you can hang them on the side of the house with a string. The owl can be mounted on a pole.
- Squirt the woodpecker with a water gun or hose every time you see it on your house.

Repellents

Because woodpeckers have poor senses of taste and smell, taste and odor repellents are generally ineffective. Repellents that are sticky or tacky to the touch and applied with a caulk gun over a broad area where damage has occurred may discourage the birds. However, these sticky substances have several drawbacks:

- They can coat the woodpecker's feathers, impairing its ability to fly or keep warm; or other birds may become coated or entrapped.
- Some may stain or discolor siding and other surfaces.
- They can attract and hold dust and dirt.
- They may melt and become runny in warm weather and turn brittle in cold weather. Cold weather may make it impossible to apply the repellent at all.

Sticky repellents are sold under a number of different brand names, including Tanglefoot,® 4-The-Birds,® and Roost-No-More.™


Cindi Brunner

Lethal Management

On rare occasions, it may be necessary to kill a woodpecker if damage persists and all applicable non-lethal management options have been exhausted. No matter which method you choose, you must have the proper permits to kill a woodpecker. You can use a shotgun or .22 rifle loaded with rat (or bird) shot. If gunfire is unsafe or illegal where you live, you can trap and kill the bird in a rattrap with a wooden base. Nail the trap to the side of the house near the damaged area. Bait the trap with nutmeats (walnuts, pecans, or almonds) or suet tied or wired to the trigger and place the trap with trigger down toward the ground. Make sure the trap is out of reach of children and pets. Also, be aware that the trap may kill nuthatches and other birds that may be attracted to the nutmeats.

Miscellaneous Options

Suet may be used to lure woodpeckers away from damaged areas, especially if they are looking for food. However, if the woodpeckers are involved in cavity excavation or drumming, putting out suet may actually attract more woodpeckers and possibly create a larger problem.

"If the woodpeckers are involved in cavity excavation or drumming, putting out suet may actually attract more woodpeckers and possibly create a larger problem."

If you decide to try luring woodpeckers away from damaged areas using suet, please be vigilant and remove the suet if it appears that you are attracting additional woodpeckers.

Suet should not be used during warm weather, as it becomes soft and will mat the woodpeckers' feathers, making it difficult for the birds to fly and keep warm and dry.

A final option is to do nothing. Drumming woodpeckers may cause little to no damage, especially if the drumming occurs on aluminum siding or gutters. If this is the case, and you can tolerate the drumming noise, you may choose to not employ any of the discussed options and let the problem resolve itself. Things will most likely quiet down once the drumming male has found a mate.

Woodpecker Ecology & Damage Management

This fact sheet is part of a series designed to help you successfully manage wildlife damage problems on your property. The series includes additional publications which focus on controlling damage from specific animals, plus an introduction to wildlife damage management.

INFORMATION ABOUT WOODPECKER IDENTIFICATION & DAMAGE MANAGEMENT CAME FROM:

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This publication is available in pdf format at: wildlifedamage.uwex.edu

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