

ON THE WILD SIDE

Woodpeckers: tree dwellers and drillers

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The woodpecker started tapping at 5:30 this morning. How can it tap so fast? It sounds almost like a sewing machine. Some people call it drumming. In my neighborhood it is probably a Downy Woodpecker. Other drummers in the area are the Hairy Woodpecker, the Northern Flicker and the Pileated Woodpecker. Drumming is used to establish territories for these woodpeckers.

The Red-bellied Woodpecker is also a local woodpecker, but not a drummer. They are more likely to be found picking at bark rather than drilling into it.



Downy woodpeckers love to supplement their diets with suet in the winter.

Woodpeckers are well adapted for their lives in the trees pecking at wood. They have four toes on their feet, two pointing forward and two pointing backward. Their claws and feet are strong and their legs are short. This makes them very good at walking up tree trunks. Their very stiff tails act as a brace and allow them to lean away from a tree while pecking. They have long sticky tongues that they can wrap around insects to pull them out of holes in trees or in the lawn.

Woodpeckers that do lots of drilling tend to have long bills that are kept sharp by their constant pecking action. It's hard to imagine what it would be like to get dinner by hammering away at a hole in a tree trunk. Did you ever wonder whether woodpeckers get headaches while searching for food, or why they don't have brain damage? Scientist have found that woodpecker brains are small and don't have much cerebrospinal fluid, the watery

fluid that surrounds our brains and fills their hollow parts. Their brains don't move around as much as ours do in our skulls and this helps prevent injury.

In addition, the bones of the skull are thick and arranged in a way that transmits most of the drilling force to the neck. Woodpecker nostrils are covered with feathers, and while they peck, a membrane closes down over their eyes to protect them from flying wood chips,.

One of the first woodpecker challenges is telling the difference between a Downy and a Hairy Woodpecker. First there is size. The Downy Woodpecker tends to be smaller, but that doesn't help much if you don't see both birds together. Here are some other things to look for. The Hairy Woodpecker has a longer bill – almost the length of its head, and the Downy Woodpecker, with its shorter beak, has black bars on its white tail feathers.

The first time you see a Red-bellied Woodpecker you might call it a Red-headed Woodpecker! They have bright red caps extending down the back of their heads, pale fronts and striking black and white bars on their backs. The red belly is very hard to see! These birds have become more common year-round residents in Massachusetts and feed on berries and seeds as well as insects. They are forest birds, nesting in deep holes in dead trees or tree limbs, but also often venture in to bird feeders.

When you spot a Northern Flicker it might be walking around on the ground looking for ants and beetles. They prefer woodlands and edges where the habitat is open, so it is common to see them in your yard if there are trees nearby. Flickers are gray and brown with a bit of red on the face and intricately patterned plumage. Characteristically there is a flash of white rump feathers when a Flicker takes off in flight.

While walking in the woods, if you see a large rectangular hole in a dead tree, you know that a Pileated Woodpecker is in the area hunting for ants and wood-boring beetle larvae. Their holes often provide convenient feeding areas for other birds. Pileated Woodpeckers are big, about the size of a crow. They have a loud ringing call often followed by drumming.

Woodpeckers are fun to watch and they are also an important part of our ecosystem. In addition to eating large numbers of insects, their abandoned nesting cavities provide good nesting places for secondary nesters like swallows. On a more practical level, if you see woodpeckers habitually pecking at a wooden structure in your yard, you might want to check it for insect invasion.

To help preserve forests for woodpeckers, consider registering your yard as a Certified Wildlife Habitat (a National Wildlife Foundation program.) Visit our web site www.nortonlandpreservation.org or go to the National Wildlife Federation website: www.nwf.org/In-Your-Backyard.aspx

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