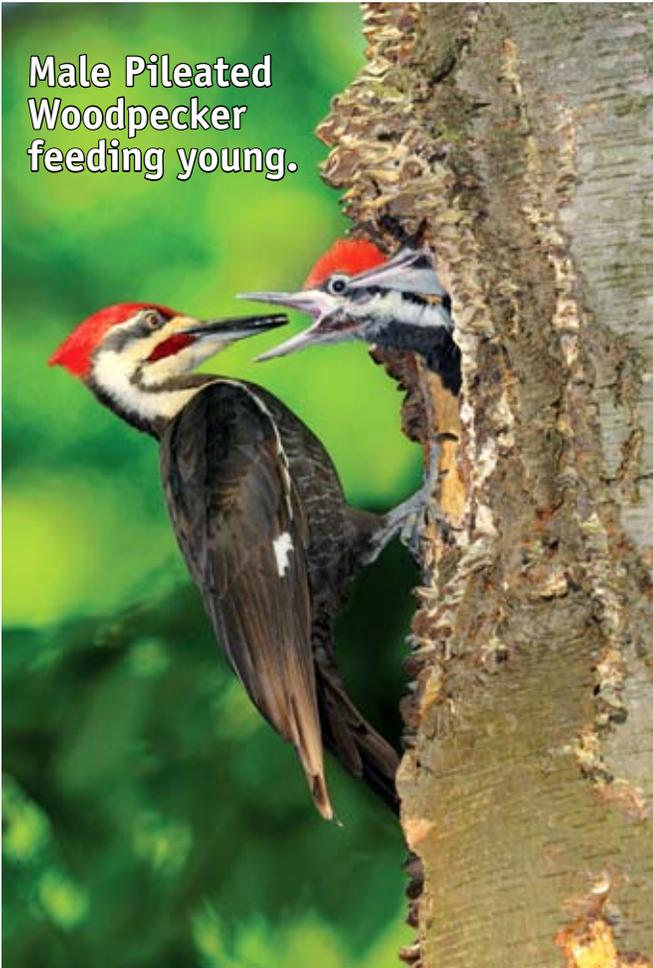




Living With Wildlife

Woodpeckers in Massachusetts



Male Pileated Woodpecker feeding young.

Woodpeckers (Family Picidae) are uniquely adapted to forested habitats, with lives that are centered on the trunks and branches of trees. Six species breed commonly in Massachusetts: Downy Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Pileated Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and Red-bellied Woodpecker. A seventh species, the Red-headed Woodpecker, is a rare and local breeder in Massachusetts.

Description: Woodpeckers are small- to medium-sized birds, ranging from 7 to 15 inches long. Most have distinctly patterned black or brown and white plumage. Sexes can be distinguished by differences in head markings, and the males of all 7 species (and some of the females) have brilliant red facial markings, crowns, or crests.

Woodpeckers have short legs and sharp-clawed toes, typically 2 that point forward and 2 that point backward on each foot, that are adapted for clinging to tree bark. Stiff, pointed tail feathers help to prop the birds upright on tree trunks. Woodpecker bills are strong, straight, and pointed and are used to chisel, peck, and pull away bark and wood in search of insect prey, to excavate cavities in trees used for nesting or as winter roosts, and to communicate by “drumming” on trees. A reinforced, shock-absorbing skull and strong neck muscles power the bill and help cushion the shock of

repeated blows to wooden surfaces. A woodpecker’s tongue is long and extendable, barbed, and coated with bristles. It can be used to spear and extract wood-boring insects, as a brush for licking sap, or as a “sticky trap” for catching ants. Woodpeckers do not have true “songs,” but instead use sharp calls and rapid, rhythmic, drumming with their bills on wood and other surfaces to attract mates and announce territorial boundaries. Both males and females drum.

The **Downy Woodpecker** is our most common, and smallest, woodpecker, so named because of the soft appearance of its feathers. Similar in appearance but slightly larger is the **Hairy Woodpecker**. Both species have white fronts, black-and-white patterned backs, black caps and cheeks, black-and-white checked wings, and a red patch on the crown in adult males. They nest throughout Massachusetts in forested habitats ranging from deciduous or mixed deciduous-coniferous forests to small woodlots, suburban yards, and city parks. Both species are common visitors to winter bird feeding stations offering beef suet, and both call and drum as part of courtship and territory maintenance.

Unlike most other woodpeckers, the **Northern Flicker** is frequently seen on the ground foraging for ants and other insects. It breeds commonly throughout the state, in both deciduous and mixed forests,

and in areas where stands of trees are interspersed with more open habitats such as at parks, golf courses, cemeteries, and suburban yards. Its name comes from one of its calls, a series of loud notes: *flicka-flicka-flicka*.

The **Pileated Woodpecker** is our largest woodpecker, nearly crow-sized, with a bright red crest, black and white patterned face, and flashing white underwings that are visible in flight. It tends to inhabit extensive forests with larger diameter trees that can provide nest cavities, and is largely absent from southeastern Massachusetts. It makes large, distinctively shaped oval or oblong holes in trees when feeding, and usually excavates its nest cavities in dead trees that are at least 15 inches in diameter. This species mates for life and maintains pair bonds throughout the year.

The **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** breeds commonly in forests dominated by birch, beech and maple, especially west of the Connecticut River. Its drillings on tree trunks, including hemlocks, pines, maples, birches, apples, and hickories, are easy to recognize: horizontal lines of small, evenly spaced holes that spiral around and down the trunk. Sapsuckers feed on sap oozing from these holes, as well as on insects attracted to the sap. The birds peck small holes or slits to make the sap flow, and may later enlarge them to small, square-shaped holes. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and other small birds and mammals sometimes feed at sapsucker drillings. Both



**Hairy
Woodpecker**

Photo © by Bill Byrne



**Male Northern
Flicker**

sexes drum, and the pattern is diagnostic – a short roll followed by several distinct, measured taps, slower at the end.

The **Red-bellied Woodpecker** has a zebra-patterned back and scarlet crown and nape; a small patch of red or pink on the lower belly is often difficult to see in the field. Formerly uncommon in Massachusetts, this species has expanded its range northward in recent decades and now nests throughout the state.

Habitat: As a group, woodpeckers inhabit the full extent of treed habitats in Massachusetts, including deciduous, coniferous, and mixed forests and woodlots, forested swamps, suburban yards, orchards, golf courses, cemeteries, village greens, and city parks. Woodpeckers thrive in habitats that contain older, larger-diameter trees with features that are often indicative of insect prey and opportunities for excavating cavities: rough, scaly or broken bark, dead or dying limbs or trunks, and damage caused by insects, weather, disease, or fire.

Life History: Woodpeckers are usually seen singly or in pairs, seldom in flocks. Most Northern Flickers and Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers are migratory, while the other species are year-round residents in Massachusetts. They nest during April, May, or June in holes they excavate in trees. Diameters of entrance holes range from 1.25 inches for Downy Woodpeckers up to 3.5 - 4.5 inches for Pileated Woodpeckers. Depending on the species, 3-10 eggs (usually 4-6) are laid in a cavity lined with wood chips. Incubation periods range from 11-18 days, generally longest for the largest

Photo © by Bill Byrne

species. Sexes share incubation duties, with males usually sitting on eggs at night. Young are fed by both parents and develop rapidly, commonly leaving the nest cavity 3-4 weeks after hatching.

Woodpeckers excavate wood not just for nest cavities, but also to obtain insect prey, and to create or enlarge cavities used for winter shelter. Downy Woodpeckers in fall, for example, may spend 5-8 days to excavate winter roosting holes. Cavities excavated by woodpeckers may later provide nest sites or shelter for other animals, including chickadees, nuthatches, bluebirds, owls, and flying squirrels.

The principal prey of most woodpeckers are tree-dwelling insects, including adults, larvae, pupae, and eggs of wood-boring species and species that live under bark. Biologists suspect that woodpeckers detect some prey acoustically, by hearing insects chewing or moving about in wood. Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers feed on tree sap and insects that are attracted to it. Northern Flickers often feed on ground-dwelling insects such as ants. Woodpeckers also feed on berries and other fruits, nuts, and seeds.

Woodpeckers hammer on wood as a means of communication, drumming rhythmically, especially in spring and early summer, to advertise their presence, establish and maintain breeding territories, and attract mates. Drumming is usually done on resonant, often dead or hollow, tree trunks or limbs. Occasionally, woodpeckers will drum on buildings or other wooden or metal structures, probably because they resonate and amplify the drumming sounds. In spring and early summer, woodpeckers may drum at dawn on downspouts, gutters, chimney caps, siding, or even metal propane tanks. This loud, resonating, and repetitive noise can be a source of considerable annoyance!

Woodpecker Damage and Prevention

Woodpeckers occasionally damage the wooden siding, trim, or eaves of buildings. Damage is most likely to occur in spring or fall to buildings with cedar, pine, fir, redwood, or plywood siding, and to wood that is dark-colored (brown or gray) or natural-stained. Woodpeckers may also drill into aluminum flashing, vinyl siding, or wooden utility poles.

The shape and extent of damage varies. Most commonly, woodpeckers chip out pieces of wood and chisel holes that are quarter to half-dollar sized, cone-shaped, and of varying depths. Pileated Woodpeckers may excavate larger holes that are oval or oblong-shaped. Although woodpeckers may be attracted to structures with rotten wood and insect infestations, woodpecker damage to a building does not necessarily indicate the presence of unsound wood or insects. Biologists suspect that, often, woodpeckers peck on sides of buildings either because buildings resonate and amplify the sound, or because buildings are perceived to have a "hollow" resonance suggestive of unsound wood or a cavity that can be excavated. Insects and over-wintering pupae are often found in rotten wood or under loose shingles or clapboards, however, and if more than one woodpecker is visiting a structure, insects are likely present.

Methods to prevent damage fall into two broad categories: discouraging woodpeckers by harassing or scaring them away, or using materials to physically prevent them from continuing to cause damage. If possible, begin control measures as soon as possible and before a bird becomes habituated to damaging behavior. Also be aware that woodpeckers may stop damaging a structure at any time, for unknown reasons.

Scare Tactics: Woodpeckers can be frightened away from a house by yelling, clapping, broadcasting music from an open window, or other loud noises. Spraying the bird with a water hose can also work. Be persistent! Hanging strips of high-reflective Mylar tape over the area to be protected may be the most effective visual means of discouraging woodpeckers from causing further damage. Tape may be looped along eaves and gutters, or multiple strips can be hung vertically on walls to protect siding. Hanging aluminum pie plates on string in front of the affected area may also discourage woodpeckers. Commercially available helium-filled mylar balloons (silver or with large, owl-like eyes are recommended) can also be used as scaring devices. Tie balloons securely to rocks or bricks placed on the ground, so that the balloons bob in front of the damaged area. **Do not use mylar balloons near overhead power lines.** Stationary model owls, plastic snakes, and silhouettes of hawks, owls, or cats are generally ineffective as deterrents.

Cover Damaged Areas: Wooden siding or other parts of a building can be protected from woodpeckers by covering the area with plastic sheeting, a nylon tarp, or netting. Attach the covering material to eaves, rain gutters, or window sills so that it hangs at least 3 inches out from the wall, thereby preventing the bird from grasping the wall through the material with its sharp claws. If necessary, nail a board to the top of the wall, above the area to be protected, from which the covering material can be hung. Or, heavy plastic can be stretched tightly over the damaged area and attached securely with staples, nails, or tape. It is important that the woodpeckers not be able to gain a grip with their feet, which is necessary for them to be able to peck or drum. Leaving the bottom of the plastic or tarp free to blow in the breeze may help to discourage the birds, although sometimes it may be necessary to secure all sides to prevent birds from getting underneath it.

Plastic fruit netting can also keep woodpeckers away from wood surfaces. In addition to being hung to protect siding, netting may be used to keep woodpeckers away from eaves and the undersides of wooden gutters. For homeowners concerned about appearances, properly chosen netting can often be quite difficult to see from a distance. Small-mesh hardware cloth or metal flashing may be used to cover pecked areas to prevent further damage. Damaged areas should be repaired or covered as soon as possible to prevent further damage and to avoid attracting insects and other woodpeckers.

Sticky repellants such as “Tanglefoot” are difficult to use on siding, but may be effective on smaller areas of gutters or chimney caps. Chemical repellents are generally ineffective. Limited use of insecticides may be necessary if the problem is the result of an insect infestation.

Damage to healthy ornamental, shade, or fruit trees is sometimes caused by Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers. This damage can be discouraged by wrapping the section of trunk or limb where the sapsucker is drilling with small-mesh (0.25 inch) hardware cloth or burlap. Smearing the affected area with sticky or tacky bird repellents may also discourage further damage.

Woodpeckers and the Law: All woodpeckers are classified as migratory non-game birds and are strictly protected by the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act and by state law. It is illegal to destroy, relocate, or possess these birds, their eggs, or nests. Woodpeckers can be legally killed in Massachusetts only under a co-signed federal and state Migratory Bird Depredation Permit issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife.

Woodpeckers are ecologically beneficial and have considerable aesthetic value. Lethal control of offending birds is seldom warranted, and should always be a last resort.

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For more information contact **MassWildlife** at:

Western Wildlife District, Dalton: (413) 684-1646

Connecticut Valley Wildlife Dist., Belchertown: (413) 323-7632

Central Wildlife District, West Boylston: (508) 835-3607

Northeast Wildlife District, Ayer: (978) 772-2145

Southeast Wildlife District, Bourne: (508) 759-3406

Field Headquarters, Westborough: (508) 389-6300

or visit our website at www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/facilities/districts

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