



LIVING WITH WILDLIFE

WOODPECKERS IN MASSACHUSETTS



Woodpeckers are uniquely adapted to forested habitats. Six species commonly nest in Massachusetts: the Downy Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Pileated Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and Red-bellied Woodpecker. The Red-headed Woodpecker is a rare and local breeder in Massachusetts.

DESCRIPTION

Woodpeckers have strong bills 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 both sexes use sharp calls and rapid, rhythmic drumming with their bills on wood and other surfaces to attract mates and announce territorial boundaries. 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.

LIFE HISTORY

Woodpeckers nest during April, May, or June in cavities 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 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. Woodpecker migratory strategy varies by species as most Northern Flickers, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, and Red-headed Woodpeckers migrate, while other species are year-round residents in Massachusetts.

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.

FOOD, HABITS, AND HABITAT

The principal prey of most woodpeckers are tree-dwelling insects, including adults, larvae, pupae, and eggs. Woodpeckers also feed on fruits, nuts, and seeds. Biologists suspect that woodpeckers detect some prey acoustically. Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers feed on tree sap and insects that are attracted to it. Northern Flickers feed on ground-dwelling insects such as ants. Woodpeckers inhabit the full extent of treed habitats in Massachusetts, including deciduous, coniferous, mixed forests and woodlots, forested swamps, and suburban and urban areas. Woodpeckers thrive in habitats that contain older, larger-diameter trees with features that are indicative of insect prey and excavating cavities: rough or broken bark, dead or dying limbs or trunks, and damage caused by insects, weather, disease, or fire.

TIPS FOR RESIDENTS

Woodpeckers can 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. Most commonly, woodpeckers chip out pieces of wood and chisel holes that are quarter to half-dollar sized, cone-shaped, and of varying depths. Although woodpeckers may be attracted to structures with rotten wood and insect infestations, damage to a building does not indicate the presence of insects or unsound wood. Insects and overwintering pupae are often found in rotten wood or under loose shingles or clapboards. If more than one woodpecker is visiting a structure, insects are likely present.

Woodpeckers 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. Methods to prevent damage fall into two broad categories: discouraging woodpeckers by scaring them away, or using materials to prevent them from causing damage. Begin control measures as soon as possible and before a bird becomes habituated to damaging behavior.

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 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 plastic fruit 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 with its claws. 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. Damaged areas should be repaired or covered as soon as possible to prevent further damage and to avoid attracting insects and other woodpeckers.

IF YOU ARE EXPERIENCING PROBLEMS WITH WOODPECKERS OR HAVE QUESTIONS, VISIT [MASS.GOV/MASSWILDLIFE](https://www.mass.gov/masswildlife) OR CONTACT YOUR NEAREST MASSWILDLIFE OFFICE:

Central Wildlife District, West Boylston: (508) 835-3607
Connecticut Valley Wildlife District, Belchertown: (413) 323-7632
Northeast Wildlife District, Ayer: (978) 772-2145
Southeast Wildlife District, Bourne: (508) 759-3406
Western Wildlife District, Dalton: (413) 684-1646
Field Headquarters, Westborough: (508) 389-6300

Photos courtesy of MassWildlife/Bill Byrne