

Whidbey Audubon Society Fact Sheet



LIVING IN WOODPECKER COUNTRY

Whidbey's Woodpeckers:

Our island is blessed with five woodpecker species: Pileated, Hairy, Downy, Northern Flicker and Red-breasted Sapsucker.

Importance of Woodpeckers:

Woodpeckers are key species in our forests. They eat large numbers of carpenter ants, boring beetles, bark beetles, and other insects injurious to forest health. Their abandoned nesting and roosting holes in trees and snags (standing dead trees) are used by many birds and mammals. The Chestnut-backed Chickadees and Red-breasted Nuthatches that grace your bird feeders probably started as eggs laid in an old woodpecker cavity. Small owls, squirrels, bats, and chipmunks also use these abandoned woodpecker holes.

Human/Woodpecker Conflicts:

Woodpeckers occasionally come into conflict with humans when they rap on our buildings. There are three reasons why woodpeckers (usually Northern Flickers) hammer on human-made structures:



- **Drumming:** Woodpecker species are unable to sing like American Robins and other songbirds. Instead, they find a dead tree branch or other resonant object and rap out a quick staccato. This announces a bird's defense of territory from others of its species and is used to attract a mate. Northern Flickers have learned that metal flashing around chimneys and metal rain gutters are quite useful for drumming. This activity rarely results in damage and is limited to the breeding season, March through June.
- **Feeding:** Sometimes buildings become infested with carpenter ants or other insects. Woodpeckers have been known to peck out insects from buildings for feeding purposes. The resulting holes tend to be small.
- **Nest Cavities and Roosting Holes:** Woodpeckers drill out new nesting holes each spring for nesting purposes and may also carve holes or nighttime roosting. These cavities are much larger than feeding holes

Deterring Woodpeckers:

There are several proven strategies for keeping woodpeckers from damaging a house or other structure. It's important to be aware of which of the above woodpecker activities are taking place with your building.

The strategies listed below should be used together; quite often one method alone isn't enough.

Steve Ellis, Whidbey Audubon Society, March 2014

- **Scaring:** Hang Mylar strips or aluminum pie tins from eaves. The slightest breeze turns these metallic objects, causing flashes of light. Other products sold for this purpose include hangings that resemble giant eyes (brand name Terror Eyes)*. Hawk or owl decoys work well but need to be moved from time to time to give the appearance of a live bird. Banging pots and pans when a woodpecker alights on a building will scare it away. Commercial sound deterrent systems reproduce bird stress calls which in turn scare off the woodpeckers.
- **Exclusion:** Hang netting or a tarp over the affected area. Netting prevents woodpeckers from creating nest cavities. Tarps efficiently block birds from wooden structures.
- **Repellents:** One type is a sticky product that is spread over the affected surface. Woodpeckers will not put their feet into sticky or slick substances. The other product type has a taste that repels woodpeckers but will not harm them.
- **Direct Action:** As a last resort, a garden hose can be used to spray a woodpecker as it attempts to perch on the side of a building.

Woodpecker Protection:

Killing woodpeckers is illegal as it violates both state and federal law. Woodpecker nests are protected under the Federal Migratory Bird Act. Employment of the above tactics should prevent the perceived need for killing woodpeckers.



Woodpeckers are an important part of our natural heritage. Allowing trees and standing snags to remain will keep these charismatic birds flying free forever.

For more information on these and other birds, contact Whidbey Audubon Society, www.whidbeyaudubon.org .

Other Resources:

Living with Wildlife In The Pacific Northwest, Russell Link, University of Washington Press, 2004.

Cornell Lab of Ornithology, www.birds.cornell.edu/wp.../control.html

*Whidbey Audubon Society has no financial interest in any woodpecker deterrent product.