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Deterring Woodpeckers

Woodpeckers are easily recognized by their drumming activity and distinctive markings. Many woodpeckers sport white spots or stripes on a black background and brightly colored patches (usually red) on their heads. People often fail to notice the variety and abundance of woodpeckers that occur even in a developed suburb until the birds come practically to their doorstep, damage their homes or awaken them in the early morning.

One or two pairs of hairy woodpeckers, downy woodpeckers and yellow-shafted flickers per city block are not unusual where the trees are mature and an occasional wooded lot may be found. Migrant populations of flickers, yellow-bellied sapsuckers and downy woodpeckers swell the ranks of resident birds each year.

Woodpeckers are an important part of our forest and backyard ecosystems. Although their value is not measured in dollars and cents, their insect-eating activities are priceless and their aesthetic value is great. It is only when a direct conflict develops between human property and avian interests that management is necessary. A look at the types of property damage caused by woodpeckers may help to formulate an appropriate response to it. In the light of our knowledge of bird behavior and ecology, the management techniques below allow the population to remain for the benefit and enjoyment of all.

Fall Woodpecker Habits

Woodpecker damage in the fall occurs over a protracted period and can most often be attributed to hairy and downy woodpeckers. Throughout most of the Northeast, yellow-shafted flickers are migrants, as is a portion of the downy woodpecker population. Injury in the fall begins as the young of the year leave their nests and the population levels begin to rise. Later, as fall progresses, certain types of food become less abundant and the birds disperse, settling down for the winter. Resident hairy woodpeckers often go through courtship and pairing in the late fall and early winter.

In some locales, fairly large populations of hairy and downy woodpeckers build up in the fall. This may be due to a homeowner feeding birds throughout the year, or because there is an abundant natural food source. This latter situation occurs, for example, when a large old tree is dying and high populations of bark and wood insects infest it. If the concentrated food source is removed in the fall, the birds must disperse to feed. If you would like to discourage woodpeckers, year-round bird feeders should be temporarily emptied, and dead wood should be removed from trees.

Spring Woodpecker Habits

Yellow-shafted flickers and migrating downy woodpeckers cause most of the damage in spring. Beginning with flickers in mid-April, activity continues through mid-May until most courting woodpeckers have paired and settled down to the duties of nesting. Resident downy woodpeckers court and form pairs as early as the first of February, so these do not usually add to the injury caused by the intense activity that newly arrived migrants are subject to.

Drumming Sites

During courtship most woodpeckers advertise their existence to prospective mates through flight displays, calls and drumming. Drumming by a woodpecker is approximately equivalent to singing by a songbird and its effectiveness is largely determined by the resonance of the drumming site. Most woodpeckers travel about on the margins of their territories testing drumming sites. If a particularly resonant site is found, that location will become a regular stopping place. At these chosen sites the bird will drum to announce itself to a prospective mate and proclaim the site as a portion

of its territory. Other drumming posts within the territory function most often as signaling places and are not used in territorial defense.

Many homeowners are annoyed to discover that wooden shingles, especially cedar shakes, form excellent drumming sites. Shingles, especially when dry, are satisfyingly resonant (from the birds' point of view), and their rough surfaces provide a good perch while drumming.

Flickers are likely to use an eave, downspout or even an old television antenna for drumming. While this results in little damage, their waking hours are not the same as those of many homeowners. Being awakened at five or six in the morning by a passionate woodpecker is not many people's idea of enjoying nature.

Drilling Damage

Woodpeckers occasionally drill into shingles and siding in search of food. The diet of woodpeckers consists mainly of insects, berries, nuts, and seeds collected from trees and shrubs. Northern Flickers may be found feeding on ground insects such as ants. Sapsuckers drill very small holes in trees to feed on sap. Woodpeckers perform a great service by eating insects harmful to trees, such as wood borers.

A variety of living things may be found behind most forms of siding, including carpenter bees and cluster flies. Some insects are found commonly in rotted wood; woodpecker injury may be an indication that repairs are needed. Extensive damage not restricted to one or two places on the side of a building results when a woodpecker discovers such a lode of food. Woodpecker feeding injury to siding may be prevented by barring insects' access to protected sites. Check with Cooperative Extension to determine the type of insect present (there is a nominal fee for identifications), and for the latest management information.

Nesting and Roosting Sites

Woodpeckers are very selective when choosing sites for their nesting holes. They look for dead trees or snags that have a hard outer shell and a softer inner cavity. Some find soft cedar siding and insulation beneath to be very useful for this purpose. They excavate nesting holes at the start of the breeding season, usually in late April and May. Roosting holes are usually built in the late summer and fall in preparation for winter. Nesting and roosting cavities are usually only slightly larger than the width of the bird and are either round, rectangular, or gourd-shaped. Larger holes may be surrounded by smaller half-finished holes, or by clusters of tiny holes at corners, on eaves and on corner boards. These are often the results of drumming activity.

Management of Drilling and Drumming

The best way to keep woodpeckers from hammering on your house is to begin damage control as soon as you hear the first tap; you should continue these measures even after the woodpecker has left to ensure that it does not return. Any holes the bird has made in your house should be immediately repaired with putty or copper wool and painted or stained to avoid attracting more woodpeckers. Flashing or netting may be used to keep them off the structure

Since resonance is a necessary requirement for a drumming site, it may be possible to remove loose pieces of wood or place padding behind the affected area to deaden the sound. Visual deterrents, such as aluminum foil strips, old data CDs, or shiny strips of a similar material may discourage woodpecker drilling and drumming. The strips should be attached at the eaves (or hung by string); the material should be long enough to hang down below the area under attack. (It is not necessary to decorate the whole house this way - just the affected areas, but you may have to add more reflectors if the bird finds a new site nearby.) As the strips reflect light and flutter in the breeze, they will disorient the birds and coax them to move on. Windsocks, shiny pinwheels and decoy predators (must be moved regularly) may also be effective. Prevent insect infestations that may serve as a food source.

Source: Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology http://www.birds.cornell.edu/wp_about/background.html

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