

# Wildlife Damage Management Fact Sheet Series

# Woodpeckers

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Woodpeckers, flickers, and sapsuckers are members of the family Picidae. Their beaks are sharply pointed for pecking into wood, their saliva is sticky, and their tongues are especially long so that they can be extended to dislodge insects from inside wood. They have stiff tail feathers and short legs with two claws that face forward and two that face backward, enabling them to cling to tree trunks, wood siding, or utility poles.

Nine species of woodpeckers—red-headed, red-bellied, downy, hairy, three-toed, black-backed, and pileated (Figure 1) plus the northern flicker and the yellow-bellied sapsucker—breed in New York State. A tenth species, Lewis' woodpecker, is a casual visitor.

## General Biology

The adult males of most species of woodpeckers in New York State have a feather pattern of black, white, and red. Females are similar but are typically less colorful and usually lack red markings. The three-toed and black-backed woodpeckers, as well as the northern flicker, are exceptions to this color pattern.

Although woodpeckers can become a nuisance in some situations, they provide a valuable ecological service. Woodpeckers consume many insects, some of which are agricultural and forest pests. In addition, they are intriguing birds to view and observe. Woodpeckers use their sharp, pointed beaks to drill into trees in search of food and to excavate nest cavities in which they sleep throughout the year. Bristly feathers around their nostrils prevent wood dust from entering as the birds chisel.

Woodpeckers have calls as do other birds, but they also use a rapid, rhythmic pecking or “drumming” sound to proclaim their territories and attract mates. Both sexes may drum by striking their bills against a hollow or dried branch or other resonant objects.

Woodpeckers breed in the spring and typically lay between two and six eggs, and they may have two or three broods each year. The incubation period lasts from 11 to 14 days for most species but may be longer for larger woodpeckers. Both parents care for the young in all species. Young leave the nest after 20 to 30 days, depending on the species.

Some species of woodpecker, such as the northern flicker, yellow-bellied sapsucker, and red-headed woodpecker, are migratory, but most others live year round in New York State.

## Habitat and Food Habits

Woodpeckers, which depend on trees for shelter and food, are found in or on the edge of wooded areas. Depending on the species, they may chisel cavities into dead or live tree trunks or branches or use

preexisting ones. Some species, such as downy and hairy woodpeckers, excavate new cavities each year. Others, such as the northern flicker, return to the same cavity annually.



Figure 1. Pileated woodpecker

Most woodpeckers feed primarily on wood-boring insects and may consume a variety of other insects as well, including ants, wasps, and bees that are found on trees. Northern flickers commonly feed on ants that they gather from the ground. In addition to insects, many woodpeckers feed on berries, fruit, nuts, and seeds, particularly at times of the year when insects are not available. The yellow-bellied sapsucker feeds on tree sap that oozes from horizontal rows of small holes that it drills into tree trunks (Figure 2). The sapsucker's tongue is shorter than that of other woodpeckers and has fine, hair-like processes on the tip that helps the birds collect sap by capillary action. The sap also serves as an insect trap from which insects can be harvested.

### Description of Damage

Woodpeckers sometimes damage buildings and trees while searching for food or a place to nest or while proclaiming their territories. Wooden houses and buildings located in forested suburbs or rural areas are most likely to suffer pecking damage. Most damage occurs from March through June, when woodpeckers are establishing territories and breeding season is beginning. Holes may be chiseled into wood siding, eaves, window frames, and trim boards. Woodpeckers prefer cedar and redwood siding but will damage pine, fir, and other woods. Untreated or stained wood is preferred over painted wood. House siding made of plywood with vertical grooves (especially cedar or redwood) is particularly susceptible to damage because insects hide or lay eggs in the tunnels left open by these grooves. Woodpeckers often peck holes into the siding in search of food and may leave narrow horizontal areas of damage.

Woodpeckers often drum, especially in the spring, on objects that have resonant qualities such as metal gutters, downspouts, chimney caps, metal roof valleys, stovepipes, or even trash cans. Although drumming causes little structural damage other than occasionally removing paint from metal surfaces or disfiguring wood surfaces, the noise often can be heard throughout a house or building and can become annoying. Woodpeckers often drum in the early morning when homeowners are still asleep.

Sapsuckers bore a series of parallel rows of closely spaced holes (1/4- to 3/8-inch diameter) in the bark of limbs or trunks of healthy trees and use their specialized tongues to remove the sap. In residential or agricultural areas, sapsuckers will feed on a favorite ornamental or fruit tree. Nearby trees of the same species may be untouched. Holes may be enlarged, and bark may be removed or sloughed off. Limb and trunk girdling sometimes kills the tree. In addition, fungi, bacteria, and other diseases and wood-decaying organisms can enter through the wounds, affecting the health of the tree. Wood-staining fungi and bacteria may also enter the wound and reduce the quality of the wood if it is cut.

Woodpeckers may occasionally take fruits and nuts from orchards or backyard trees. In the Northeast, however, controls against woodpeckers to protect commercial crops are rarely necessary.

### Laws and Regulations

Woodpeckers are classified as nongame migratory birds and are protected by the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 and by New York State Environmental Conservation Law. Federal (United States Fish and Wildlife Service) and state (state wildlife agency) permits must be obtained to trap or harm woodpeckers causing damage in commercial fruit and nut orchards or around the home. It is time-consuming to obtain permits for lethal control of woodpeckers, and often the damage may subside before the permit has been issued. Interim methods used to deter woodpeckers while waiting for permit approval may reduce damage sufficiently.

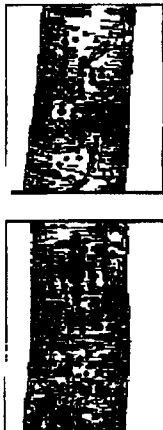


Figure 2. Horizontal rows of holes drilled by yellow-bellied sapsuckers

### Preventing Damage

As for any wildlife species, the key to reducing damage is to act quickly when damage first begins and use a combination of methods to reduce the problems. Woodpeckers can be very persistent, and it is hard to break their habits once established.

### Repellents

Currently no repellents or toxicants are registered by the Environmental Protection Agency for use against woodpeckers on structures or on trees.

### Netting and Other Barriers

To prevent further damage under eaves, attach lightweight nylon or plastic "bird netting" to the edge of the eaves and to the side of the damaged building. The netting should hang out at least 3 inches from the building to prevent the birds from reaching through the net. Hardware cloth can also be used to exclude woodpeckers.

Aluminum sheeting or "flashing" can be placed over holes or other affected areas on wood siding or other parts of buildings or structures to deter pecking; woodpeckers cannot cling to the surface of the metal. The sheeting can be painted to match the siding for a more aesthetic solution. To be effective, the sheeting has to be put up quickly after the bird has started to become a problem.

Sapsuckers damaging small trees can be deterred by draping nylon netting over the entire canopy and trunk. Parts of larger trees can also be protected by loosely wrapping hardware cloth (1/4 inch) or burlap around the trunk or limbs.

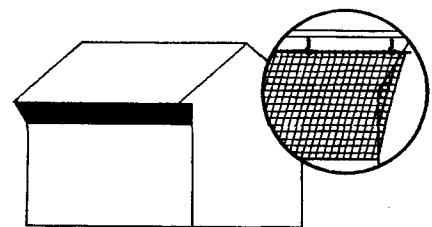


Figure 3. Plastic netting attached to a building from the outside edge of the eave and angled back to the wood siding. Insert shows some method of attachment using hooks and wooden dowels (from Hyngstrom et al. 1994).

## Frightening Devices

Strips of aluminum foil (3–4 inches wide and 4 feet long), mylar tape, aluminum pie tins, or brightly colored wind socks can be hung over a damaged site. Attach the strips in a manner that will allow the objects to move in the wind and maximize reflection from the sun.

Scare-eye balloons and hawk or owl decoys may also be used to frighten woodpeckers. To ensure that these methods are effective, however, use several different visual scare devices in varying combinations and move them around frequently to prevent the birds from becoming habituated to them.

Sound can also be used to frighten woodpeckers. Banging on pots and pans or playing a radio in a window near the damaged site may be effective in some cases. Propane cannons have been used in orchards to frighten woodpeckers and other birds. As with visual scare devices

it is important to move the sound around and to vary the length of time and time of day that the sound is used. Using visual and sound tactics in combination can increase effectiveness.

Frightening devices often provide only short-term control of bird problems and may fail to resolve woodpecker conflicts. Physical barriers may provide the only reliable long-term control of woodpecker damage.

## Cultural Practices

Because woodpeckers often target wood-sided buildings in search of food, precautions may be taken when constructing new buildings or re-siding old ones. If possible, buildings constructed in or near areas prone to woodpecker damage should be sided with brick, aluminum, stone, steel, or vinyl. When using cedar siding, remove all loose knots and fill the holes with wood putty. Reverse board-

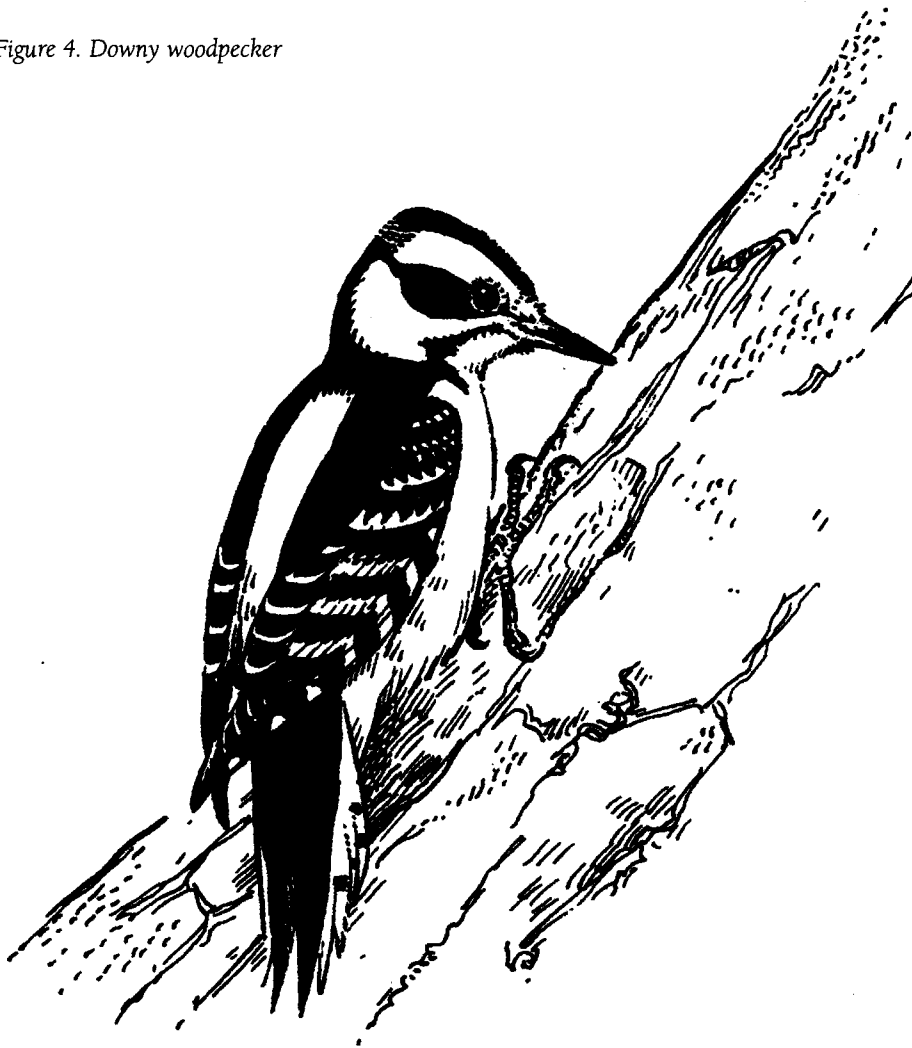
and-batten siding should have all exposed core-gaps plugged with wood putty or caulk to prevent insects from entering. Before plugging the gaps, run a stiff wire through the gaps to remove any insects that may be present.

Insect problems in wood siding or other structures should be handled only by certified pesticide applicators. Removing insects may enhance structural integrity and aesthetics and, in some cases, help resolve woodpecker conflicts.

## References

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- Marsh, R. 1994. "Woodpeckers." In *Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage*. S. Hygnstrom, R. Timm, and G. Larson, eds. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension.

Figure 4. Downy woodpecker



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