

Those Pesky Woodpeckers

By Susan Camp

Last fall, my friend Rebecca emailed me with a question about woodpecker damage to maple trees. I meant to research the topic, but never got back to her about it. Rebecca reminded me about her question a couple of weeks ago and I promised to follow up.

I am nearsighted, so birds all look sort of fuzzy to me, but even I can identify the characteristic tapping and drumming of woodpeckers, and I can recognize the big pileated woodpecker that has laid waste to an old tree at the edge of our marsh for a number of years.

There are eight species of woodpeckers in Virginia. Seven are year-round residents. The pileated woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*) is the largest, reaching up to 19 inches in length. His size and bright red cap or crest distinguish him from the smaller, but no less attractive, red-headed (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*), red-bellied (*Melanerpes carolinus*), downy (*Picoides pubescens*), and hairy (*Picoides villosus*) woodpeckers. These five species prefer to feed and nest in excavations in dead hardwood, rather than pine, although they will live in mixed forests.

The red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) is a federally endangered species. It survives in Virginia in old pine forests south of the James River. The northern flicker (*Colaptes auratus*) is unique in that it digs in grassy and bare areas for ants, beetles, and grubs. The female flicker lays her eggs in cavity nests in dead hardwood or pine trees. The yellow-bellied sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*) is the only part-time Virginia resident, migrating to warmer climates during the frigid winters of the northern United States and southern Canada.

Woodpeckers and sapsuckers are uniquely fitted with chisel-like beaks, long tongues, two backward-facing toes, and stiff tail feathers that allow them to perch on tree trunks and peck to extract sap and insects from the bark and wood. Sapsucker damage is easily recognized by rows of horizontal holes that can eventually girdle a tree and destroy it.

In the spring, male woodpeckers drum on trees, house siding, rooftops, and even metal pipes to establish territory and attract mates. They can cause substantial damage to roofs and wood siding, in addition to the depredation they wreak on trees. Homeowners become frustrated with the noise and the holes in their houses. So what can be done to stop the woodpeckers? Well, they can't be shot or poisoned. They are protected by the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Threatened or endangered species, like the red-cockaded woodpecker, also are protected by the Federal Endangered Species Act of 1973 and the Virginia Endangered Species Act. Violations incur hefty fines and possible jail sentences.

High-frequency sound devices aren't helpful because most emit sound above the hearing level of woodpeckers. Loud heavy metal rock music, propane cannons and similar products might work, but your neighbors will stop inviting you to barbecues. Plastic owls and hawks and rubber snakes

work for a day or two until the birds figure out that the fake predators don't move. Sticky products that get on the birds' feet also stain house siding and adhere to feathers, impeding flight.

Moving objects, like aluminum strips or pie plates, toy windmills, and windsocks are more helpful woodpecker deterrents. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology page on woodpecker control offers a variety of methods to repel the birds from your property.

Woodpecker articles on the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) website and the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture article "Controlling Woodpecker Damage" offer more suggestions. The Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) document "Home Grounds and Animals 2016" Section 8-3 provides information on migratory birds and threatened and endangered species.

Several articles and websites indicate that you might have to sacrifice one tree to your pesky resident woodpecker, in order to save the rest. The bright side is that he most likely will chose a tree that is diseased or dying and populated by plenty of insects for his dining pleasure.

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