

News Article

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These Birds Aren't Musicians, but They Are Drummers

Woodpeckers aren't trying to be musicians, but they are drummers! You may have heard the familiar drumming of a woodpecker before. They are omnivorous consumers of insects, tree sap and nectar, along with a few other food sources. After woodpeckers have excavated a hole, they use their extremely long tongues to procure their food. Drumming can also indicate territorial signals.

It has been easy to recognize woodpecker activity on ash trees in recent years. According to Purdue Extension's "Got Nature?" blog (April 9th, 2015 posting), emerald ash borer (EAB) grubs provide a tasty treat and important winter and early spring nutrition to hungry woodpeckers. Woodpeckers of several species are experts at detecting and extracting these grubs by pounding holes in tree bark. Once the woodpeckers find the emerald ash borer (EAB) larvae, their excavation activities flake off the outer bark to expose the lighter colored inner bark, creating large, patchy areas in trees that are heavily infested.

Judy Loven, USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services (retired), authored a Purdue Extension publication on woodpeckers and managing the damage they cause.

From smallest to largest, Loven said the year-round Indiana woodpeckers include: downy, hairy, red-headed, red-bellied, and pileated woodpeckers. Between the red-bellied and pileated woodpeckers is the northern flicker. The yellow-bellied sapsucker is just a winter resident of Indiana, flying north to northern-tier U.S. states and into Canada for the summer.

The largest and easiest woodpecker to identify is the pileated woodpecker, at 16½ inches long. Most folks who have seen a pileated woodpecker talk rather excitedly about the experience. This crow-sized bird has a crested red head with dark brown to black feathers. They can excavate large cavities in trees for nests.

Woodpeckers can also cause damage to structures.

Loven said the downy and hairy woodpeckers cause the most damage in Indiana. Both are identified by their white backs and black and white striped wing feathers. "the downy is sparrow-size and has a short bill," said Loven. "The hairy woodpecker is robin-size."

Loven said all types of buildings and materials may be attacked by woodpeckers, but damage most often appears on cedar-sided buildings during the spring breeding season. "Excavated cone-shaped holes in siding can be several inches across and the holes may penetrate to the insulation layer," said Loven. "These holes are rarely an indication of insect infestation."

“Woodpecker damage to trees is characterized by a shredded or ragged appearance,” said Loven. However, gardeners and landscapers may have noticed neater, individual holes in a straight line either horizontally or vertically on trees. “The yellow-bellied sapsucker bores neat rows of ¼ inch holes spaced closely together,” said Loven. “Most often, they bore on trees rather than structures since they feed on sap.”

Since woodpeckers are considered beneficial birds that feed mostly on insects, they are protected by federal and state laws.

Loven said that homeowners wishing to prevent damage to structures can employ frightening devices or exclusion methods. Frightening devices may include hanging high-reflective mylar tape from eaves, helium-filled mylar balloons, spraying birds with water, or methods that involve sound. One of the better exclusion methods is utilizing a mesh bird netting from the eave edge to the base of the structure and attached with tacks, staples or tape.

For more information, access the Purdue Extension publication, “Woodpeckers,” at www.edustore.purdue.edu.