

WOODPECKER CONFLICTS WITH HUMANS

An excerpt from *Woodpeckers of North America*, by Stephen Shunk

Woodpeckers are among the most recognized of all birds, and their recognition often results from conflicts with humans. Drumming on resonant artificial surfaces and excavating in artificial structures are the two most commonly reported nuisance behaviors. Both behaviors result from habitat loss caused by humans. Habitat loss due to urban and agricultural (including timber) development has plagued North American bird populations for centuries, and woodpeckers are no exception. One particular human activity falls under the category of habitat loss and profoundly affects all communities with cavity-dwelling wildlife: the removal and exclusion of snags, or dead trees. Lack of snag availability leads woodpeckers to pursue their livelihoods in whatever places most closely resemble their native habitats. And this leads to conflict with humans.

DRUMMING

On early spring mornings and often with frustrating persistence, the sound of a woodpecker's drum resonates into your home like a machine gun targeting your metal chimney cover. Prior to our introduction of wonderfully resonant artificial surfaces, woodpeckers probably performed most of their drumming on loud resonant snags. Once woodpeckers discovered artificial surfaces, however, they never looked back.

Recruitment and retention of snags may provide alternative drumming posts, but only the conscious exclusion of resonant surfaces in building practices will permanently eliminate these favored communication sites. Rest assured that drumming behavior is seasonal and does not damage your home. This assurance does not stop the broadcast of your natural alarm clock, but it may help you accept this fascinating behavior that is unique to the Picidae family.

EXCAVATIONS

Excavations in undesired places introduce an entirely different level of nuisance. Opportunistic woodpeckers have probably exploited artificial structures for cavity excavation since the advent of artificial structures. Excavations in utility poles have plagued engineers since the earliest telegraph lines were strung into the pioneer countryside. Today, property owners spend millions of dollars annually to mitigate or prevent woodpecker damage. Very little formal research has been published that describes the costs and overall effects of undesirable woodpecker excavations. Instead, we have invented a plethora of products and practiced many futile behaviors to deter woodpeckers. These have included:

Visual scaring devices, such as compact disks hanging on fishing line or fake predators (e.g., owls) installed on rooftops;

Sound deterrents, such as recorded predator calls triggered by motion-detection devices, or even the banging of metal pans;

Tactile repellants, such as sticky commercial products that prevent effective footing;

Forced exclusion, including the prompt covering of newly excavated holes with tin can lids or plastic garden netting hung across favored excavation sites;

Woodpecker-proof siding materials, such as synthetic siding; and the last resort,

Lethal control, which violates federal laws when conducted without a permit.

None of these deterrents provides a permanent solution to woodpecker nuisance behavior. While we are "cultivating" snags in our yards, forests, and woodlands, there is one mitigation effort that will keep most woodpeckers away from our homes: the installation of artificial nest structures.

The most ubiquitous and most conspicuous of all North American woodpeckers is the Northern Flicker. Because flickers are weak excavators, they will often reuse old cavities from prior years, many of which were once excavated by other woodpecker species. Given a lack of suitable nest cavities—or snags that are easy to excavate—flickers will readily excavate in the side of your building. Thankfully, flickers are also the only North American woodpeckers that will consistently use an artificial nest structure. If flickers are attempting to excavate in your home, install a constructed nest box in a nearby tree, and you may quickly solve the problem. Search online for nest-box specifications, or visit your local backyard bird store and buy one.

In the meantime, advocate for the conservation and restoration of healthy forest and woodland habitats. Cavity-dwelling wildlife communities deserve their own chance for survival.