

(Phil Fowler)



Picidae the WOODPECKERS

Woodpeckers play a very important role in our forest community. They are “keystone” species—an animal of vital significance to the long-term survival of many other animals within a particular natural community. This is because woodpeckers are “primary excavators,” the first to excavate nest cavities in dead trees. These cavities are crucial for use by countless birds and other animals that are physically unable to excavate their own. Our local forest ecosystem would dramatically change if our woodpeckers were lost.

Every woodpecker requires a nest cavity to successfully raise their young, but tree cavities are a limited and ephemeral resource. Dead “snag” trees are often cut down—making trees suitable for cavity excavation even harder to find. There are two kinds of snags: hard snags and soft snags. Hard snags are trees that are still mostly alive, but that have dead limbs with cavities. Hard snags can provide nest cavities for many years. Soft snags are dead and mostly decayed. They may be riddled with usable cavities, but they do not last long. Both are valuable to many species of wildlife.

Competition for nest cavities can be fierce as many snag trees are available for just a few seasons before they fall to the ground. Due to the limited availability of this vitally needed resource, cavity-nesting birds (as a group) are in serious decline in many parts of the country.

In 1897, one Cabarrus County farmer witnessed the ephemeral nature of a woodpecker nest cavity firsthand:

“Simpson Lefler, a farmer of No. 9 township, came near meeting a sudden death yesterday in his harvest field. He had been cradling wheat and becoming thirsty, laid his cradle at the butt of a large dead tree in the centre of the field. When he returned from the spring, a beautiful wood-pecker entering its nest in the top of the tree attracted his attention, and as he stood gazing at the bird, the tree fell, scraping his body and mashing his cradle into a thousand pieces. Lefler was so unnerved that he was unable to work during the remainder of the day.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*, June 18, 1897

Seven species of woodpeckers are regularly found in Carolina Piedmont. One additional species, the Red-cockaded Woodpecker is discussed in the Supplementary Bird List. Six of these seven woodpeckers breed here. The other, the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, is a winter resident. The smallest of these birds is the Downy Woodpecker, just under 7 inches in size. The largest is the Pileated Woodpecker, which at 16 ½ inches, is an impressive sight. Woodpeckers are lots of fun to watch as they move about trees—drumming, calling, or drilling holes in search of the insects that lay just beneath the bark. Most people enjoy having these birds show up in their yard visiting their bird feeders.

Each year, however, one of the most common calls received by local nature centers is for assistance dealing with “nuisance” woodpeckers. These are woodpeckers that repeatedly peck on the siding of homes, on gutters, or on other man-made structures. It is possible these birds do this in search of food, but no one is entirely sure why this happens—as many species drill holes in dry wood siding where no insects are found. One other reason woodpeckers may occasionally or repeatedly drum on a variety of types of building materials is to produce sounds to either defend their territories or possibly attract a mate. Preventing or repairing damage from nuisance woodpeckers is a lucrative business for wildlife control companies in many neighborhoods in the Central Carolinas.

In July 1889, one of these “nuisance” woodpeckers caught the eye (or ear) of the editors of *The Charlotte Democrat* while the bird was making a scene in the middle of town:

“A few days since we saw a woodpecker pecking on the brass wing of the Eagle that is poised on the end of the flag pole at the Charlotte Mint. He was pecking away, but got nothing except a metallic tattoo from the wing. Mr. Woodpecker made a brave racket but his bill paid for it.” —*The Charlotte Democrat* July 5, 1889

(This woodpecker report was placed just below an important announcement that Charlotteans were setting out to bring the latest technological advance of the day to the city, the editors writing: “fifty influential men of the *Chronicle* [are] bending their energies upon applying for a graphophone.”)