

Pileated Woodpecker *Dryocopus pileatus*



Folk Name: Logcock, B'Jesus Bird, Johnny Cock

Status: Resident

Abundance: Rare to Uncommon

Habitat: Mature forests

“The pileated woodpecker is a living symbol of the American wilderness, a reminder of the virgin forests that existed before European axes felled the great trees. Along with the great horned owl, raven, and wild turkey, the big woodpecker was a part of the limitless eastern forests.” —John Trott, 2000

The Pileated Woodpecker is our largest woodpecker, growing almost as big as an American Crow. It is quite a distinctive bird with a very large stout bill and a “flaming” red crest. The male has a red malar stripe. It has a white eye line and a white stripe on its neck. From the neck down, its body is almost all black when perched. In flight, it shows a small white wing crescent on the upper wings and large white wing patches on the forewings below. It can be very loud, and its calls will often echo throughout the large expanses of mature forest where it nests. It can occasionally be found in younger forests with “scattered large, dead trees.” Mature forests with larger diameter trees support more pairs of woodpeckers than forests with smaller diameter timber. “Wet forests” like bottomland or streamside forests are preferred.

R.B. McLaughlin of Statesville, NC, provided one of the earliest descriptions of the nesting of the Pileated Woodpecker in the Carolinas in his paper titled “Following



Pileated Woodpecker at a typical “frame” nest in a heavily wooded Charlotte neighborhood. (Debbie Foster)



the Logcock,” published in the March 1888 issue of the journal *Ornithologist and Oologist*. In it, McLaughlin provides great detail on how to find Pileated nests, nest descriptions, clutch size, and more. He discusses seven nests in Iredell County, at least two of which were active in early to mid-April, and he describes the Pileated as “a strikingly handsome bird” with a “lord-like demeanor.”

William McIlwaine provided the first known account of a Pileated Woodpecker in Mecklenburg County on January 22, 1927. “I was back again [in Charlotte] about the first week of January. Snow was on the ground. I took a few minutes in the woods. There was the sound here and there of woodpeckers. And one was making a mighty racket. I discovered a pair of pileated woodpeckers. The call was a sort of demon-like laugh.” A half century after McLaughlin reported his Statesville birds, Maurice Stimson shared this report with C.S. Brimley. “I know a tract of woods where I go when ever opportunity allows it near our old place in the country 12 miles east of Statesville and the Logcock nearly always greets me in these woods.”

On February 21, 1948, Dave Adams, Jim Layton, and Heywood Bobbitt sighted a Pileated Woodpecker at the Camp Steere Boy Scout Camp on Lake Wylie in southwestern Mecklenburg County. The group observed the bird beginning to excavate a nest hole, but it was soon frightened away and never returned. A Pileated Woodpecker was not reported again in Mecklenburg County until the spring of 1961. Julian Meadows, a teen member of Mecklenburg Audubon, found a Pileated Woodpecker along the Catawba River and was able to track down its nest during the last week of April.

Joe Norwood provided these details of this nest:

The nesting hole, in the central branch, 12–14 inches in diameter, of a dead hickory tree, was about sixty-five feet up. The tree was fifty feet from the river cabin of Mr. C.C. Eason of Charlotte and ten feet from the river. ...On May 7, Frank Ramsey and his father visited the site and observed two nestlings, their heads protruding from the hole. Frank reported the red head patch well developed. The adult (only one was seen at a time) would call from across the river about a minute before approaching the tree. Once at the nest the adult was very quiet although the young were noisy as feeding was imminent; the type of food could not be determined. After each feeding, the parent bird would depart with a fecal sac. While sixteen millimeter color movies were being made, the adult would approach the nest but sit for two or three minutes, apparently disturbed by the camera's whir, before entering the hole.

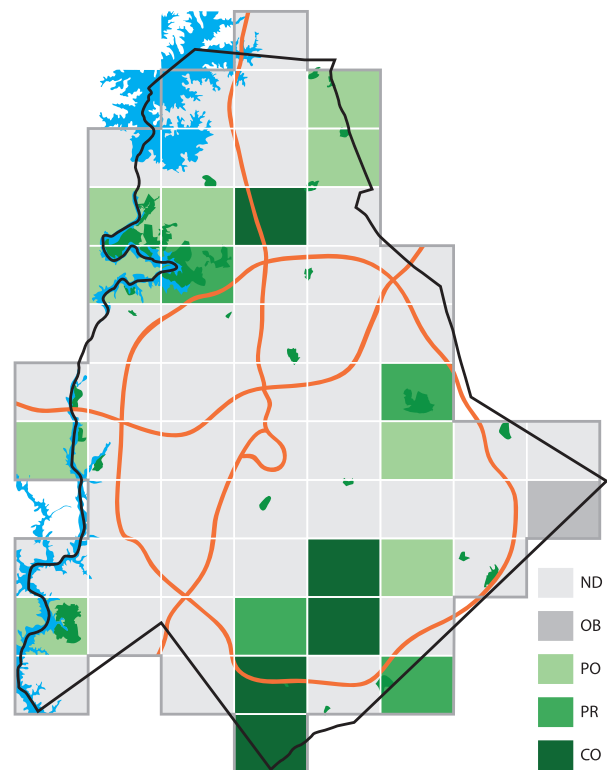
On May 21, Mr. Eason reported to the Ramseys that he observed the parents calling repeatedly to the young and saw at least three leave the nest. Later he thinks he saw a total of six pileateds in the woods around his cabin, making a possible total of four young. ...Mr. Eason had previously requested the Duke Power Company to remove the dead tree, but he became so enthusiastic over the "logcocks" that he promised to rescind the order; in addition, he performed a very real service by preventing one man from shooting the woodpeckers. We hope that he will "spare that tree" since it is well known that the pileated, if undisturbed, will return to the same tree year after year.

William M. Smith, immediate past President of the local Audubon club, photographed this nest with an adult feeding young, and the photograph was selected for publication in the December 1961 issue of *The Chat*.

Occasionally, Pileated Woodpeckers are reported as a nuisance woodpecker. In 1974, a builder began construction on a new "environmentally-friendly" residential development along a forested peninsula, beside the shore of Lake Wylie. Unfortunately, the builder's good intentions at attempting to save trees and maintain a natural setting resulted in unexpected harm to a small population of Pileated Woodpeckers living there. Before the first home was finished, a "most persistent" Pileated Woodpecker began to wreak havoc by pecking holes in the siding of several of the houses. The builder tried many different ways to discourage the bird, but finally "was forced to ask [for] help and have the bird destroyed." The unfortunate bird was mounted by a taxidermist and was later put on display at the entrance to the development.

The Pileated Woodpecker remains a rare to uncommon bird in this region. It has never made the list of top 50 birds seen on Spring Bird Counts or Christmas Bird Counts conducted here. However, one or two can usually be found on a count day if prior scouting of proper habitat has been conducted and the bird's location has been "staked out." Pileated Woodpecker has been reported on more than 50 Spring Bird Counts conducted in the region since 1955, with an average of 2–3 birds per count, and a high count of 11 birds reported on the Stanly count in 1976.

Pileated Woodpeckers often must compete with other cavity-nesting animals for the holes they have excavated in their nest trees. Their large rectangular entrance hole and deep nest cavity is of great interest as the availability of large cavities is very limited. Pileated Woodpeckers have been known to force out Wood Ducks that have "moved in" while they were out and have themselves been evicted by Eastern Screech-Owls in search of a place to raise their young. They have also been known to successfully nest with other animals, like Fox Squirrels, and American Kestrels—at the same time, in different holes they have excavated in the same tree. Data collected during the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas indicate a breeding code of confirmed or probable in 6 to 10 survey blocks for this species in the county. It was therefore designated as a "vulnerable" breeding bird.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Local (PR/4, CO/5)