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LIVING

And red-bellied makes four . . .

Native southerner is a recent addition to local woodpecker population

For human spirits struggling to keep a stiff upper lip during these short, cold days of January, the reality that some of our birds face puts our winter woes in perspective. How would you like to be hanging by your feet from a tree trunk in sub-zero weather, your arms folded behind your back, while you repeatedly bang your head against the rigid bark in search of frozen insects? Welcome to the life of a woodpecker.



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

The Kawarthas has long been home to three resident species of woodpeckers, but now a newcomer has arrived. No longer are hairy, downy, and pileated woodpeckers the only species one is likely to see during winter. The red-bellied woodpecker has followed the example of the cardinal and mourning dove to become yet another southern species to extend its range northward into central Ontario.

However, let's begin with a brief introduction to woodpeckers in general. As a group, these arboreal birds share a number of fascinating adaptations for clinging to and hammering into vertical surfaces. First, their stiff tail is used for support as they move up and down tree trunks and as a brace as they excavate holes. Second, woodpeckers have two forward-facing and two rear-facing toes. The backward toes help increase support when clinging to a tree trunk. Most other birds have three toes that face forward and only one that faces backwards. Equally important, their sturdy bill is chisel-shaped so as not to bind in the wood. Finally, the woodpecker's tongue is barbed, sticky and ridiculously long. In the case of the red-bellied woodpecker, it is at least three times the bill length. This length is necessary for the tongue to reach down inside insect tunnels in the tree trunk. To fit inside the bird's skull, the tongue wraps behind and over the top of the head and then coils around the eye socket.

PECKING WITH PURPOSE

Not all of the "pecking" that woodpeckers do serves the same purpose. There are actually three different circumstances in which woodpeckers hammer on wood or other surfaces: drumming, cavity excavation and feeding. Drumming is used to communicate over long distances. Woodpeckers rapidly strike a resonant surface in such a way as to create a rolling sound. Hollow trunks and branches provide the necessary acoustic properties for effective drumming, but stove pipes, metal roofs, rain gutters, and even stop signs are also popular. Yellow-bellied sapsuckers have a special affection for the latter surfaces. As you can well imagine, the noise can become rather irritating!

Because its primary purpose is to attract a mate, drumming occurs mostly in late winter and spring. Both the male and female drum. It is possible to identify some species by their drumming speed and rhythm. Yellow-bellied sapsuckers, for example, drum with an easily recognizable, irregular rhythm.

Whereas drumming involves using mostly the head and neck muscles, cavity excavation requires the muscles of the entire body. It is therefore a much more physically-demanding undertaking. In order to withstand this kind of

punishment, woodpeckers have evolved a number of ingenious adaptations such as flexible cartilage at the base of the bill that cushions the bird's brain from the shock of each blow.

Flight pattern, too, is the same in all woodpeckers.

They all have an undulating, roller-coaster way of flying, punctuated by heavy wing beats. Once you learn to recognize their flight pattern you'll be able to pick woodpeckers out even before they've landed. In some cases, you can even tell which species it is. For example, a dark, crow-sized bird that is flying in an undulating fashion is automatically a pileated woodpecker.

The downy and hairy woodpeckers are the most common species found in the Kawarthas. Both are most noticeable in winter, when they are common visitors to suet feeders. Although their black and white colouration and the presence of a small red spot on the back of the male's head make downy and hairy woodpeckers appear very similar,

they can easily be told apart. The downy, our smallest woodpecker, is only slightly larger than a sparrow. In comparison, the hairy is almost as large as a robin. Still, in some situations, size is hard to judge. One of the best ways to separate the two species is to look at the bill. The downy has a very small, rather dainty bill, while the hairy's bill is much more chisel-like and longer. In fact, it is about as long as the distance from the base of the bill to back of the head. The downy's bill is only half as long as this distance.

Voice is also helpful in telling these two woodpeckers apart. The downy makes a slow, descending call that is not unlike the whinny of a horse. The hairy's call, on the other hand, is higher



KARL EGRESSEY photos

Pileated woodpeckers (top) are regular winter inhabitants here but tend to congregate in different small areas from year to year; the red-bellied woodpecker is a recent arrival, moving up from its regular southern habitat; two smaller varieties that look quite similar are the hairy (bottom left) and downy (bottom right) woodpeckers. One way to tell them apart is the hairy woodpecker's longer, stouter beak.

pitched, sharper, and does not descend at the end.

With the exception of the yellow-bellied sapsucker, Ontario's woodpeckers are non-migratory. However, some species engage in rather unpredictable seasonal wanderings, especially in winter. The purpose of these movements is most likely to

find food. The pileated woodpecker is one such wanderer. As big as a crow, the pileated is famous for its Woody Woodpecker red crest. It also has a distinctive white neck stripe and white underwings.

Pileateds sometimes turn up in urban areas in large numbers. The winter of 2008 was such a year. A dozen or more pileateds took up temporary residence in Peterborough for several months and provided residents with great entertainment – and some consternation – as they hammered away at neighbourhood trees.

This winter, too, several pileateds have been reported, especially in the city's north end. This woodpecker's wintertime diet consists primarily of

large, black carpenter ants, which hibernate in clusters in the centre of both dead and living trees. They enter a state known as diapause, a form of insect hibernation. Their bodies produce glycerol, a sweet-tasting substance that keeps their body tissues from freezing solid. The ants quickly become active again when temperatures rise above freezing. Check the heartwood exposed by a pileated's excavations and you can often find the maze of passageways made by these insects.

The red-bellied newcomer I mentioned earlier is a very common woodpecker in parts of southern Ontario and throughout the eastern United States. About the same size as the hairy, the red-bellied is distinguished by its red nape (and crown, in the case of the male), uniformly barred back, and pale brown wash below. The bird is not terribly well named since the faint wash of red on the belly is rarely visible. Its call is a loud, rich, throaty "churr," given by both sexes. These very vocal birds usually let you know about their presence long before you even see them.

The red-bellied lives primarily in mature deciduous forests where large-diameter trees and dead trees are present. In late winter, these birds become very conspicuous because of their loud contact calls, drumming, and elaborate courtship displays. Nests are located in dead trees or in the dead limb of a live tree. It is important for many bird and animal species that we leave dead trees whenever it's safe to do so. By removing them, we reduce the number of places that woodpeckers – and all the other wildlife that depend on them – can live.

RED-BELLIED'S ARRIVAL

The red-bellied's arrival in our area is not surprising. The latest five-year census of the breeding birds of Ontario, carried out from 2001 through 2005, showed that this woodpecker's distribution in the province has expanded dramatically in the last 20 years, especially along the southern edge of the Canadian Shield between Lake Simcoe and the Rideau Lakes. The maturation of forests, the increased popularity of backyard feeders, and milder winters are all likely factors contributing to this rapid expansion. Ontario's highest densities of red-bellied woodpeckers are found between the bottom of Lake Huron and the north shore of Lake Erie. It is probably the most common woodpecker in Rondeau Provincial Park, for example. The Niagara Peninsula is another area of high abundance.

The majority of red-bellied woodpeckers seen in the Peterborough area are visiting feeders. They most commonly turn up south of the city in a band extending from Millbrook in the west to Hastings in the east. They seem to favour low, swampy woodlands along the Otonabee River between Peterborough and Hiawatha. The Warsaw area, too, seems to attract red-bellieds from time to time. A very atypical sighting was of a bird last spring that was coming to a feeder in Lasswade, located on County Rd. 46 east of Apsley. I would be very interested to know if a red-bellied turns up at your feeder or if you believe the bird may be nesting in your area.

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