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# LIVING

## Woodpecker adds colour to winter

This past winter has been remarkable for more than just snow. At least four quite spectacular bird species have put in an impressive showing since late fall and have added colour and interest to a long winter. Peterborough and area have seen impressive numbers of bohemian waxwings, pine grosbeaks, barred owls and, especially pileated woodpeckers.



**OUR CHANGING SEASONS**  
Drew Monkman

I have been receiving phone calls and emails since last November of pileated woodpecker sightings in the city. Not surprisingly, some of the sightings have been in the general vicinity of Jackson Park, but others have come from the areas around Homewood Avenue, O'Carroll Avenue, Armour Road north and Royal Drive in the city's north end.

Other than the yellow-bellied sapsucker, woodpeckers tend not to be migratory. Pileated woodpeckers mate for life, and pairs spend the entire year together, usually on their breeding territories. However, there has definitely been an incursion of birds into Peterborough in the past five months. Some of the literature on pileated woodpeckers suggests that in the fall and winter, the birds wander and appear in areas where at other seasons they are unknown, probably to take advantage of more abundant food. These may also be young birds looking for their own territories in which to settle. It will be interesting to see if any remain in the city to breed. In the southern U.S., the pileated is quite a common bird in suburban areas.

How many different birds are actually represented by these sightings is difficult to say. Although pileated woodpeckers fiercely defend their breeding territory during the nesting season, there is some evidence that they tolerate a few "floaters" in their territory during winter. Still, since pileateds roam widely for food, I would think a fairly small number of birds is involved.

One of the first sightings I heard about was of a rather brazen pileated in a parking lot near Jackson Park. The bird was actually hopping from car to car and pecking at the windshields. It was most likely seeing its reflection in the glass and assuming another pileated was in the area. Apparently, conflicts in fall and winter often occur near roost holes for which the birds compete. Each bird spends the night in its own roost hole.

Another bird, this time on Geraldine Avenue, was observed attacking the homeowners' window frames. Once again, the bird was probably seeing its reflection in the window and, by pecking at the adjacent wood, was simply trying to drive the "intruder" away.

Two pileated woodpeckers were also observed excavating holes in dead or dying maples on Milburn Street near Royal Drive. One hole was more than two feet long and six or more inches wide. As you can well imagine, the surrounding snow was covered with big chips of wood. A bird was also seen a few streets away feeding in a crabapple tree. Apparently, it was adding some variety to its mostly insect diet by gorging on dried fruit still on the branches. Pileateds are also sometimes attracted to suet feeders, especially when large, hanging chunks of suet are put out. Everything about this bird is dis-



Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner



Drew Monkman, special to The Examiner



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**Clockwise fro top: pileated woodpecker; sapsucker holes in a tree; and a pileated woodpecker works on a birch tree.**

tinctive. With a wingspan of two-and-a-half feet and a body the size of a crow, it is by far our largest woodpecker. Its size, along with the red crest, white neck stripe and white underwings, make this species as unmistakable as birds can be. Even at a considerable distance, its undulating, roller-coaster flight makes the bird easy to identify.

The sounds pileated woodpeckers make are equally distinctive. Most often, you hear this bird before you see it. One common call is a loud, deep, resonant "kuk, kuk, kuk..." that sounds like something out of the Amazon jungle. Apparently, the sound of the cartoon character, Woody Woodpecker, was based on the call of the pileated woodpecker. The bird's drumming, too, is amazing in its resonance. It sounds like the tree is being

bashed with a large, wooden mallet.

So, what are the birds doing in the city? Obviously, they must be finding food. The pileated woodpecker's essential wintertime diet consists primarily of carpenter ants, *Camponotus herculeanus*, a large, black ant that lives in the centre of primarily older trees. It may be that this winter the carpenter ant population is especially high, thereby explaining the above-average number of sightings.

The pileated feeds where the ants are, namely low on trees that house ant colonies. In winter, carpenter ants hibernate in clusters in the centre of both dead and living trees. They go into 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. If you check the heartwood exposed by the woodpecker's operations, you can often find the maze of passageways made by these insects.

Pileated woodpeckers appear to only do the heavy work of excavating these gaping tree chasms in the late fall, winter and early spring. The oval or rectangular-shaped feeding holes they make in doing so are unique to this species. In summer, presumably, more easily attainable food can be found. For nesting purposes, the pileated excavates a large, round hole much higher up in the tree.

The following quote from 1910, written by American naturalist Ernest Waters Vickers, is particularly evocative. "To dine on the big black timber ants, which are his

special delight, he drives holes to the very heart of growing forest trees, tapping the central chamber of the colony, where, in winter, he finds the dormant swarm unable to move and feasts upon them at leisure. And the log-cock makes no mistakes, although man might find no outward sign of an ant-tree. Doubtless, that strong formic smell, coupled with his experience in sounding tree trunks — as a man tells a ripe watermelon by the 'plunk' of it — enables him not only to find the tree, but, what is more remarkable, to drive his hole with such precision that he taps the heart of the community."

Contrary to popular belief, these woodpeckers do not kill trees when they feed at them. The presence of a pileated woodpecker on one of your trees unfortunately means that the tree is already suffering from damage by wood-boring insects. In cases of extensive drillings, however, trees may be weakened to the point of being in danger of falling.

It is fairly common to see other smaller, similarly-coloured woodpeckers in association with the pileated, both on nesting grounds and when feeding. These are not young pileateds but rather hairy and downy woodpeckers that glean food that the pileated has missed.

In the next few weeks, another woodpecker will be arriving in the Kawarthas. Yellow bellied sapsuckers are returning from their wintering grounds in the southern U.S. and Central America. The sapsucker is well-known for its habit of drumming on metal surfaces such as stove pipes and traffic signs. The rapid-fire, loud and almost continuous hammering is done in an attempt to attract a mate. However, it only lasts for a few weeks and is done only in the spring. Sapsuckers don't excavate any wood while drumming.

This is the bird that makes the lines of very small, round holes in the bark of trees. Birch, maple, and hemlock are among its favourites. The sapsucker inserts its bill into the hole to lick out the sap. If you look carefully, you can also find shallower, rectangular holes which the birds must maintain continually for the sap to flow. Hummingbirds and butterflies often visit sapsucker holes, too. The hummingbirds are attracted not only to the sap but also to the small insects that come to feed on the sap themselves. Sapsucker holes are one of the main food sources for ruby throated hummingbirds in early May, when there is little other natural food for them.

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