

Homeowners Versus Woodpeckers

by Scott R. Craven

Woodpeckers are attractive, interesting visitors to bird feeders and yards. However, they are not as harmless as they may appear to be. One of the most serious wildlife problems many homeowners face is a woodpecker hammering on the side of the house. It may seem almost humorous, but the humor is quickly replaced by anger and frustration when your house is being attacked! Not only is the hammering annoying, especially when it occurs early in the morning, but it can also cause considerable structural damage to building siding.

Each year woodpecker problems rank among the top 3 of the hundreds of calls I receive on wildlife damage problems in Wisconsin. Experience, surveys of homeowners and wildlife control specialists, and published literature provide a pretty good picture of the woodpecker problem. Understanding and documenting the problem have done little to solve it, however. While there are steps a homeowner can take, woodpecker damage remains very difficult to control.

Nationally, the Northern Flicker is often identified as the primary culprit.

Here in Wisconsin, homeowners identify Downy Woodpeckers or Hairy Woodpeckers in about half the cases in which they know the species responsible for damage. Flickers are involved in about a third of the cases, and a few are caused by Red-headed Woodpeckers and Pileated Woodpeckers.

The cause of the damage varies with season, region and building material. Territorial behavior is considered the primary cause of damage, closely followed by food-seeking. There are two distinct peaks in the incidence of damage; spring and fall, with spring damage usually exceeding the level of fall problems. Typically, spring damage is associated with territorial behavior and damage at other times of the year with food-seeking behavior. However, some "spring damage" may be winter food-seeking that goes unnoticed until the homeowner gets outside in the spring. Damage can occur at any time of the year and other causes, such as excavation of roost chambers or nest sites, may be involved. Several woodpeckers may feed on insects in or under siding, but usually only one bird is involved in territorial behavior.

Damage can vary from a single hole on one side of a building to numerous holes, up to baseball size or larger, over most of a building's surface. Cedar and plywood siding are the building materials most frequently damaged. It appears likely that any wood, particularly if it is not painted, may be subject to damage. Grooved plywood siding seems to be very susceptible as is board and batten construction with cedar boards. The plywood siding (especially a siding known as "T-1-11") problem results from a structural "defect" created in the manufacture of the plywood sheets. Internal plies are separated by a slight gap (approximately 0.5-cm wide). When the solid surface ply is grooved to simulate a reverse board and batten construction, the "core gaps" are opened to the outside. This creates tunnels throughout the sheet of plywood perpendicular to the groove. These tunnels are very attractive to insects and, in turn, to woodpeckers. The rough plywood surface provides secure footing, and the tunnels provide a food supply. The result is often extensive damage in the form of perfect rows of small holes which coincide with the location of the tunnels beneath the surface ply.

Damage to materials other than plywood is generally in the form of one or more large holes. These holes are often located near the eaves or at the corners of the building. Tennessee researchers found no strong correlation between location of damage and compass direction, even though other researchers had reported non-random orientation for woodpecker nest cavities. To the homeowner, the location of the damage is of little consequence

and is not a factor in the need for, or success of, control.

Construction of some holes may penetrate insulation as well as the siding. Several homeowners in Wisconsin reported that woodpeckers had gone as far as the interior drywall. These large chambers are rarely occupied by the woodpecker, but three cases resulted in nesting attempts by House Sparrows, a White-breasted Nuthatch, and a Black-capped Chickadee.

A territorial response may result when a woodpecker sees its reflection in a window. Substantial damage (\$3000 in one case in Ohio) may result as the bird attacks the molding around the window. In Tennessee this type of damage was often caused by Pileated Woodpeckers. In addition to the structural damage, drumming often occurs at dawn. Spring territorial drumming occurs on downspouts, chimney caps, and antennae, as well as siding. The noise created by such activity can be a source of severe annoyance.

The environment around damaged homes or buildings is usually characterized as wooded suburban or rural. In Wisconsin the expansion of subdivisions into the remaining wooded areas amidst intensive agriculture and the popularity of "natural look" wood siding has probably intensified the woodpecker problem.

The economic impact of woodpecker damage has not been well documented. Homeowners in Wisconsin reported a wide range of damage and a similar range of reaction to the damage. Of 23 individuals who provided a cost estimate for damage repair in 1983, the mean damage was \$300, with a range of \$40-\$1000. Most estimates were between \$150 and \$250. This mean value does not include an esti-

mate of \$5000 for damage to cedar siding on a 24-unit condominium.

The homeowners' perception of the damage is misleading, however, if the actual cost or professional restoration of the pre-damage condition is considered. A common response to damage is simply filling or covering the holes with a convenient material. While the homeowner will readily admit that this solution is unsightly, complete restoration is often cited as being too expensive. Thus, a cost of several dollars for a can of wood filler or a new board is an underestimate of the actual damage. In Michigan, the average cost of homeowner repair by patching was \$200, by replacing the siding, \$200-\$500, and by professional restoration, \$500-\$2000 (G. Dudderar, personal communication).

The most important aspect of woodpecker damage is how to avoid it or stop it once it starts. Several of the following techniques are worth a try, at least for temporary relief. Often a combination approach is more effective than a single technique. The key to success is to take action as soon as a woodpecker shows signs of becoming a pest. If a bird has a well established behavior pattern, it is much more difficult to stop.

- Scare the bird whenever you see it on the house. You can scare it by shooting cap guns, banging on pots and pans, or by just yelling, but you must be persistent.
- Tack aluminum foil streamers or a child's pinwheel to the damaged area so that they will move in the breeze.
- Place a toy (rubber or plastic) snake, an owl decoy, or a cut-out silhouette of a hawk near the spot. If you don't have a convenient ledge or roof, you

can hang the snake on the side of the house with a string or mount the owl on a pole. As these two examples suggest, in devising woodpecker-scaring tactics, you are limited only by your imagination.

- Try to eliminate any ledges or cracks the woodpecker may be using for a foothold when it is hammering.
- Deaden the sound-producing properties of the spot where the bird is hammering by filling any hollow space beneath the siding.
- Cover the damaged area with screen, hardware cloth or sheet metal until the bird has been discouraged.

If insects in the siding seem to be the cause, you can eliminate that attraction by removing the insects. Caulk all the tunnels in the siding. Insecticides or wood preservatives may help in some situation, although getting an insecticide into the siding where it will kill the insects is usually difficult. Treatment of the siding with toxic wood preservatives also seems to repel woodpeckers as well as providing insecticidal and wood care benefits. Check with your paint dealer about incorporating a wood preservative with a coat of stain. If the siding needs stain or paint, a heavy application of a thick latex-based product may clog the open tunnels and provide some resistance to insect infestation.

Most of these recommendations have serious drawbacks as reported by the specialists and homeowners. For example, structural modifications, such as sealing the plywood tunnels, are only useful if the damage involves that particular type of siding. Most homeowners are unaware of potential woodpecker damage and do not take such steps until after the fact, rather

than as a preventive measure. Covering or repairing the damage can be helpful; however, recommended materials (e.g., sheet metal or hardware cloth) are unsightly, and the bird may simply shift to another area on the home. One material that does appear useful for covering large areas at low cost is plastic bird netting.

Chemical treatments are limited. There are no toxicants registered for woodpecker control. Odor repellents, such as naphthalene, have little effect. Sticky repellents can be effective but are difficult to use on home siding. Insecticides or toxic wood preservatives may provide temporary relief but do not prevent reinfestation.

Alternate feeding has been cited as an effective abatement technique, if food-seeking is the cause of damage. However, suet may attract more woodpeckers to the area.

If the woodpecker persists in spite of your efforts, or if the damage exceeds your tolerance level, the woodpecker may have to be killed. Woodpeckers are protected by both state and federal laws—anyone killing one without a written permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is subject to a stiff fine. However, permits for killing damage-causing woodpeckers are available. Lethal control is a last resort and is distasteful to many people. However, in many cases it is the only hope to end the problem.

To obtain a permit application and more information, call or write:

USDA-APHIS-ADC
Room 305

750 Windsor Street
Sun Prairie, WI 53590
(608) 837-2727

The USDA office will send you an application with a return envelope. When they receive your completed application and determine that other control options have been tried or are inappropriate, the application is forwarded to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with a recommendation.

Be advised that the whole process may take 3 weeks and that effective 1 January 1990 a \$25.00 fee must accompany your permit application. The Fish and Wildlife Service will specify on the permit the number of woodpeckers that can be killed.

Once you have the permit, the troublesome woodpecker can be killed legally. You can use a shotgun or .22 caliber rifle loaded with bird shot. If gunfire is unsafe or illegal where you live, you can trap and kill the bird in a rat trap with a wooden base. Nail the trap to the side of the house near the damage. Bait the trap with a piece of suet tied or wired to the trigger and place the trap with trigger down toward the ground. **Make sure the trap is out of reach of children and pets.**

The next time you hear a tap-tap-tap on the house and there is no one at the door, look around, it could be the start of a very difficult problem with your backyard birdlife.

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