

LIVING WITH WILDLIFE

Humane, Effective Solutions to Human-Wildlife Conflicts

A Program of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals



Woodpeckers

In cities, suburbs, and small towns across Massachusetts, people are noticing a change in their neighborhoods. Some think it's good. Some think it's bad. But everybody seems to be talking about it: more wild animals are making their homes in and around people's yards and houses, in parks and playgrounds, in business developments, even right on Main Street.

Woodpeckers are fascinating animals that provide several ecological benefits. Many woodpeckers feed on insects living under the bark of dead trees as opposed to healthy ones and by doing so they prevent those insects from spreading to healthy trees. Their drilling activities also create holes that other birds and mammals will use as dens or nests. In addition, they can be an early warning signal to insect infestation if they are drilling into the side of your home.

General Information

There are twenty-two species of woodpeckers living in the United States. Although each species has distinctive plumage markings and lives in a defined area, they share several characteristics.

Woodpeckers have chisel-like bills and long, pointed tongues that they use to drill and probe under tree bark. They use their strong claws and tail feathers to help support them while they are working on tree trunks or branches. Their brains are protected from the impact of drilling by a thick skull and special sacs, and feathers around their nostrils filter dust.

Most woodpeckers live in wooded areas and use their strong beaks to feed on insects living under the bark of dead trees. Depending on the species, they eat carpenter ants, beetles, moths, caterpillars, grasshoppers, nuts, fruit, berries, and tree sap. During the winter months, they can be seen feeding at birdfeeders on suet and/or on sunflower seeds.

When it comes to building a nesting site, both the male and female woodpeckers use their beaks to excavate tree cavities. A woodpecker's nesting and roosting cavity is usually round and deep (up to 2 feet deep in trees) and is usually found in trees or in wood knots in wood siding. The eggs are laid in the spring and both parents care for the young.

Possible Conflicts and Solutions

Conflicts arise between homeowners and woodpeckers when the birds choose to focus their eating, drumming and excavating efforts on buildings with wood siding. It is understandable that some homeowners become upset when their wood siding is drilled with holes.

Woodpeckers mate and nest in the spring and consequently this is the time of year that most problems occur. The birds use rhythmic drumming on resonate objects as a territorial "advertisement" to alert

other woodpeckers in the area to their presence. This persistent drumming activity results in shallow, clustered dents rather than the deeper holes that result from feeding and nesting activities.

The most damaging woodpecker activity is caused when woodpeckers feed on insects under wood siding. Once a woodpecker finds a good food supply, they can be relentless in their feeding. Although damage can cause a homeowner stress, it can also be viewed as an early warning sign that they have an insect infestation problem that should be taken care of before more damage is done.

Woodpeckers can be persistent so the key to humanely and effectively resolving problems with woodpeckers is to act promptly and consistently to dissuade woodpeckers from causing damage.

The following are easy, cost-effective ways to prevent and repair woodpecker damage:

- Maintain the exterior of wooden buildings to prevent insect infestations.
- Fill shallow holes (make sure no birds are inside) with caulking or wood filler, and larger holes with wooden plugs or wadded window screen and

then use caulking.

- Cover damaged areas with mesh hardware cloth or welded wire to protect them from further damage.
- Secure loose boards and use filling behind ones that sound hollow to discourage drumming.

The following are simple and humane harassment techniques to encourage woodpeckers to move on:

- To exclude birds and discourage drumming - cover smaller boards with cloth or foam rubber padding.
- To prevent access to the wood siding - hang netting, plastic sheeting, or screen from the eaves and suspend it several inches from the affected wall.
- To scare the offending woodpecker away - hang aluminum pans, plastic

THE **LIVING WITH WILDLIFE** MISSION

The MSPCA Living With Wildlife program aims to protect wild species, now and in the future. The program promotes peaceful coexistence between people and wildlife in urban, suburban, and rural Massachusetts communities by helping to resolve human-animal conflicts in a humane, nonlethal, long-term and cost-effective manner.

streamers, wind chimes, Mylar® party balloons or strips of aluminum foil from the eaves so that they flutter in the wind. In addition, shouting, clapping, or banging on a pot out an open window/door may scare the bird away.

It is important to remember that nesting and roosting activities are temporary seasonal behaviors. If the woodpecker's activity is not causing damage to a building, please try to exercise patience. If the bird is causing damage, please try the humane harassment techniques listed above to discourage them.

Public Health Concerns

Woodpeckers are not considered to be a significant source for any infectious disease that can be transmitted to humans.

For more information about humanely solving human-wildlife conflicts or about the MSPCA's Living with Wildlife program, call 617-524-5632, visit www.LivingWithWildlife.org or e-mail livingwithwildlife@mspca.org.