

Wild Things: Woodpeckers

BY MARGARET BAIRD

Woodpeckers tend to enjoy a warm space in the hearts of the bird-loving public, perhaps due to our collective nostalgia for the iconic “Woody Woodpecker” cartoons of yore. But we also admire the industrious natures of these arbo-real birds. Due to their characteristic vertical posture on tree trunks and the red thatches of plumage on many species, they’re easy to

out territory. The main complaints you’ll likely hear about these birds will be noise- and damage-related (if callers mention hearing maniacal woodpecker laughter, they likely have problems beyond your capacity). Songbirds sing their hearts out to advertise themselves to prospective mates; woodpeckers drum, beating on objects with those industrial-strength beaks. The idea is for the sound to be heard over a distance, so woodpeckers will actively seek out objects that acoustically

fit the—ahem—bill. That means hollow-sounding boards like gutters, downspouts, chimney caps, and wood siding, as well as trees. Unfortunately, woodpeckers tend to choose the early-morning hours for their *rat-a-tat-tat* reveille, which—big surprise here—can quickly raise the ire of sleepy humans. Their drumming won’t do too much damage to most surfaces; while it may result in shallow pock marks in soft wood, or dents on metal, it’s mostly just the noise that’s bothersome.

But woodpeckers also excavate cavities for other activities, like nesting, roosting, and feeding. Any of those can create a holey mess, but feeding tends to be the main cause of exterior damage to buildings.

Although diets vary depending on species, most woodpeckers are insectivores who especially relish wood-boring insects. The cavities they excavate to get at those delectable critters will be deeper than drumming marks—and once woodpeckers have glommed on to a steady food source, they can be pretty stubborn about abandoning it. (The silver lining here is that woodpeckers can be, to use a feathered analogy, the canaries in the coal mine when it comes to alerting homeowners to insect infestations.) So

spot. We hang suet feeders in our backyards expressly to cater to them, and we’re awed by their ability to hammer so hard and appear none the worse for it (thanks to a remarkably designed skull that absorbs shocks in ways we still don’t understand). In short, we love having woodpeckers around—until they pick *our* place to peck at, getting a bit too close, or too loud, for our suburban sensibilities (or our migraines).

Spring is the time when a young woodpecker’s fancy turns to mating and staking

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you might let any annoyed callers know that they should thank the birds before shooing them from the premises!

It’s best to address the root cause of woodpecker problems as promptly as possible, and be as persistent as they are. A combination of quick repair of the damage and scare tactics usually works. If nesting in the side of a building can be discouraged within a few days, the bird will probably look elsewhere for more hospitable digs. Hang shiny or fluttery objects from the gutters—aluminum pans, long strips of foil, party streamers—to encourage woodpeckers to steer clear. Install netting or hardware cloth at problem locations on the home to deter drilling and create a “trampoline bounce” when the birds try to land. There’s even a surprisingly effective battery-powered “attack spider” available commercially that’s designed expressly for frightening woodpeckers.

It’s essential to practice regular maintenance on home exteriors and keep insect infestations at bay. Discourage drumming by securing loose boards or adding wood filler behind those that do sound hollow, and cover other acoustic hot spots with sound-dampening foam rubber padding or cloth. Cover damaged areas with mesh hardware cloth or welded wire to protect them from further damage. Remember that woodpeckers are federally protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, so don’t resort to inhumane or otherwise lethal solutions to conflicts with these birds. AS



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