

Dealing with woodpecker damage to houses

Barb Ogg, *Extension Educator*
&
Soni Cochran, *Extension Associate*

Woodpeckers are among the most recognized birds and are interesting to watch. They are beneficial to our natural environment, but they become a nuisance when they damage houses. Woodpeckers have a strong pointed bill, used for chipping and digging into tree trunks for wood-boring insects. They nest in cavities that they chisel deep into a large branch or tree. Several species of woodpeckers are found in Nebraska, including hairy woodpecker, downy woodpecker, red-headed woodpecker, red-bellied woodpecker and the northern flicker. The yellow-bellied sapsucker overwinters in southeastern Nebraska, but is relatively uncommon.

Damage results when woodpeckers "hammer" on houses, peck holes in search of insect food or excavate a roosting or breeding cavity. In forested areas, these activities are on trees. A high percentage of homes that are damaged by woodpeckers have natural cedar siding. To a woodpecker, the natural cedar siding and the size of the house make these houses seem like a "super tree," a huge tree that has no bark.

Drumming. During courtship activities in the spring, male woodpeckers advertise their territory by "drumming," repeatedly hammering on the side of an object, like a dead tree or limb. Unfortunately, woodpeckers sometimes choose man-made objects that amplify the sound, such as wood siding, rain gutters and downspouts.

Feeding. Wood from trees is one of the major sources of insects that woodpeckers use for food. Wood in utility poles, fence posts and wood siding is

also recognized by woodpeckers as a source of insects, especially if insects hide in cracks in the wood.

Nesting/Roosting. Woodpeckers that use a building for feeding and drumming may also drill a hole in an attempt to excavate a winter roost or nesting cavity. Woodpeckers will hammer completely through the



Hairy woodpeckers are interesting birds to watch but cause problems for homeowners when they damage houses.

siding and may attempt another nesting hole until the birds find a suitable location. We have heard of reports of this activity from late summer and early fall into the spring.

Control: The key to successful woodpecker control is to take action as soon as you notice the bird damaging the house to stop the behavior before it becomes a habit.

If the woodpecker seems to be searching for insects, you can take actions to control the insects. Caulk tunnels and other openings in the siding. Insecticides or wood preservatives may help in some situations, although getting an insecticide into the siding where it will kill insects may be difficult. If the woodpecker is drumming, eliminate ledges or the cracks the bird uses

for a foot-hold.

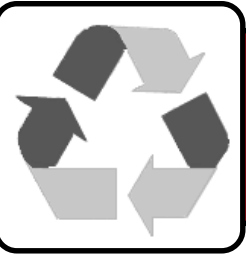
Attach visual scare devices such as strips of aluminum foil, scare eye balloons or pin-wheels, to the area of the house where the bird most often hammers. A shaving mirror with the large-image side toward the woodpecker has been effective, apparently because the mirror reflects the image of a larger woodpecker. Plastic owls and snakes may also work to scare woodpeckers. You may have to move visual scare devices regularly to keep the woodpeckers from getting used to them.

If the bird works on only one or a few locations on the house, either deaden those spots to muffle the noise as much as possible, or cover them with a piece of sheet metal, hardware cloth, or hang plastic bird netting four or five inches from the house to keep the bird away. If it seems to be trying to excavate a cavity, try putting a suitable nest box high on the house and maybe another high in a nearby tree. To make your own nest box, refer to fact sheet 024-99, Build a Nest Box to Attract Birds, available at the Lancaster County Extension Office.

If your house has natural cedar siding, use a water sealer to seal the small holes; the wood can then be painted. Some homeowners report painting their house helps reduce woodpecker damage.

Woodpeckers are migratory, non-game birds protected by the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. This means that killing protected birds or destroying eggs is against federal and/or state laws. Killing birds can only be done with a permit obtained by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. To find out how to obtain a control permit, contact the Game and Parks Commission at 402-471-0641.

Environmental Focus



Backyard habitat

Habitat restoration is important for birds and other wildlife due to our commercial and residential invasion on their natural areas. Humans are very good at building places to live and work, but we tend to not give much thought into creating habitat places where we can live in harmony with other living creatures.

You can restore and create natural areas for birds and wildlife to thrive. Creating your own backyard habitat is easy. All you need to do is make sure you have the four basic elements.

Food: Plant shrubs and trees that produce seeds, fruits and nuts. You can provide nectar for hummingbirds when they migrate through the area. Plant flowers that attract butterflies and other insects. Use supplemental feeders that offer seed or suet.

Water: Water is important in your backyard habitat. You can offer several different sources of water. Use a birdbath, or place a shallow water dish at ground level. Backyard ponds are increasingly popular and offer aquatic habitat for frogs and other small animals. In winter, purchase a small heater especially designed to keep your birdbath from freezing during cold Nebraska days.

Shelter: Make your backyard a place that critters will want to stay instead of just visit.



Plant evergreen trees and shrubs to protect wildlife and birds from weather and predators. Deciduous trees provide roosting and nesting sites. Use rocks, logs and mulch to provide cover for small animals like shrews, 13-lined ground squirrels, toads and insects. Leave a dead or decaying tree stump in your yard. Stumps provide both food and shelter for many creatures.

Places to raise young: As land in Lancaster County is cleared for development, we drastically reduce the number of nesting sites for cavity dwelling birds and animals. Bluebirds, purple martins, woodpeckers, owls and even squirrels compete for nest sites and cavity shelters. Plant evergreens, deciduous trees and shrubs. Provide nest boxes for birds and wildlife to raise their young.

This winter would be a terrific time to put together some nest boxes in preparation for the coming spring. The extension office has many publications on providing backyard habitat, building nest boxes and tips on successful bird feeding. (SC)

Recycling is for the birds

Soni Cochran
Extension Associate

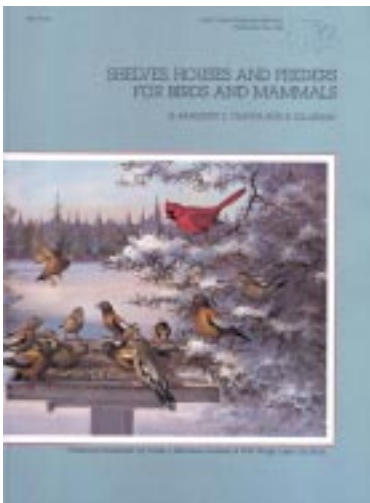
"Chick-a-dee-dee-dee"...the song of the Black-capped Chickadee. Who hasn't heard its cheery voice in the cold of winter?

These feathered acrobats are among the friendliest birds in the neighborhood. Our winter landscape is brightened by cardinals, American goldfinch, blue jays, juncos, nuthatches and, of course, chickadees who are frequent visitors of backyard feeding stations.

Feeding stations can be simple and inexpensive to make. Scrap lumber, tin cans, plastic soda bottles, milk jugs and cartons and plastic buckets are easy to find. All it takes is a little creativity and knowledge about the birds you're trying to attract.

Many birds we enjoy at our feeders have specific seed preferences or prefer suet.

Location of feeders and number of feeders is also very important.



The feeders should be protected from strong winds, preferably near shrubbery or conifers. Recycle your Christmas tree by propping it up by the feeder to give the birds added shelter. With several feeders in your backyard, more birds will have

an opportunity to feed at the same time.

Once you've started feeding birds, don't stop until spring. Birds develop feeding patterns and interruptions in the food supply may cause them to abandon feeders.

There are many excellent books on bird feeders and feeding. Stop at a bookstore or library and checkout the wonderful field guides and other resources on birds, what a great gift idea for bird and wildlife lovers!

The University of Nebraska also offers the following exceptional publication:

- Shelves, Houses and Feeders for Birds and Mammals (RP338, \$4.00). This popular book is a must for backyard enthusiasts. You'll get plans and information on constructing bird and mammal houses, shelves, a

continued on page 11

Are you feeding birds?

Find a bird feeder that is ideal for the kinds of birds you want to see in your backyard. Then select the types of food that these birds like best. Here are some suggestions for several backyard birds and their favorite foods.

American goldfinch—Niger thistle seeds, broken sunflower hearts and oil-type sunflower seeds.

northern cardinals—Sunflower seeds of all types, safflower, cracked corn, millet, other seeds, unsalted nut meats and raisins.

black-capped chickadees—Oil-type sunflower seeds, cracked unsalted nut meats, safflower and suet.

dark-eyed juncos—Red or white proso millet, finely cracked corn, oil-type sunflower seed and unsalted nut meats.

grosbeaks—Sunflower seeds of all types, safflower and cracked corn.

mourning doves—Oil-type sunflower seeds, white and red proso millet, safflower, cracked corn, wheat, milo and other seeds.

native sparrows—Red or white proso millet, oil-type sunflower seeds, cracked corn and some safflower.

woodpeckers—Suet, unsalted nut meats, sunflower seeds and cracked corn.

Most of these foods can be purchased at a local nursery and/or a specific bird supplies store. Be sure that the seeds are of high quality and are fresh. Old seeds will be avoided or just scattered on the ground. Lastly, remember to provide a water area for your fine feathered friends. Happy Birding! (ALH)

