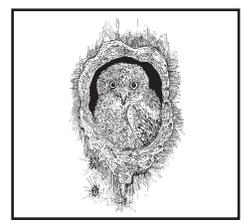
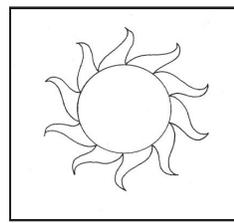
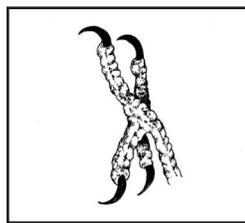
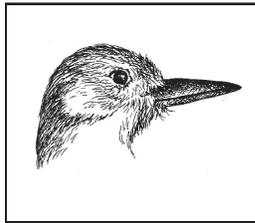




# Woodpeckers

Order Piciformes

Family Picidae

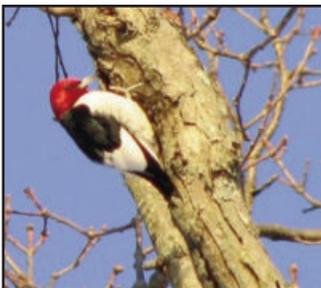


Seven species of **woodpeckers** are considered Pennsylvania residents. They are well-adapted to **chisel into trees in search of insects or to excavate a cavity** thanks to an unusually thick skull along with spongy, shock-absorbing tissues and strong neck muscles. They even have **coarse feathers around their nostrils to keep out dust and wood chips**. But that's not all. Woodpeckers have round, pointed tongues with barbed tips. This allows them to pull insect larvae out of wood. The **extremely long tongue** can be retracted into the back of the skull when not in use. They have **short, muscular legs and sharp, clawed feet** help them grip trees. Their four toes are arranged with two toes pointing forward and two backward, which enables them to climb easily and brace themselves while drilling. And finally, woodpeckers have very **stiff, strong tail feathers** to give them additional support while drilling into wood and climbing.



## Red-headed Woodpecker

*Melanerpes erthrocephalus*



This medium-sized woodpecker has a wingspan of 18" and a body about nine inches long. Many people mistake the red-bellied for the red-headed, but once you have seen this species you'll understand how it got its name. **Their entire head is a scarlet red** (immatures have a brown head). Their **bodies are marked with bold black and white** plumage. In flight a large white wing patch can be seen – a common field mark for ground-feeding birds.

**Both the flicker and red-headed woodpeckers often feed from the ground.** Redheads will **store acorns in tree cavities** and will defend these caches against squirrels and other birds. Red-headed woodpeckers prefer open forestland, farm woodlots, towns and parks with mature trees. Their cavities range from 8 - 80 feet up, often in an oak tree. Usually 5 eggs are laid and incubated for two weeks before hatching. Their call is a loud *kwrrk*.

**Courtship behavior is basically the same for all woodpeckers.** After drumming to attract a mate both sexes excavate a cavity in a branch or tree trunk. White, unmarked eggs are laid on wood chips in the bottom of the cavity. Male and female both incubate, but it is the male that often sits on the eggs overnight. The chicks stay in the cavity about 2-3 weeks eating predigested food fed by their parents. Excavation of a new cavity is required before laying a new clutch of eggs.



## Pileated Woodpecker

*Dryocopus pileatus*



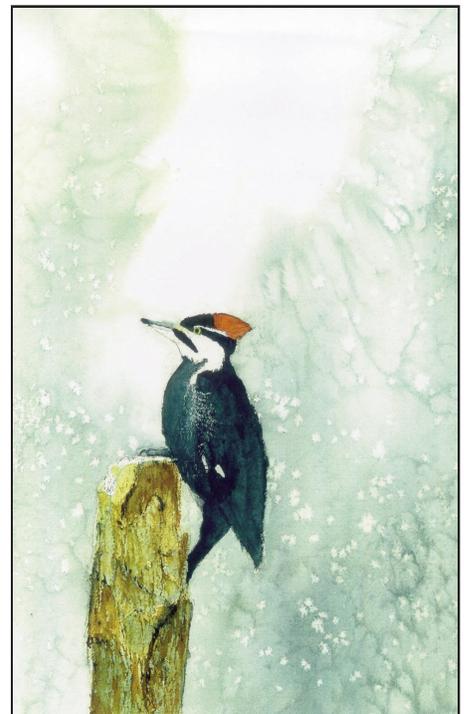
**Our largest woodpecker is the Pileated Woodpecker.** They are close in size to a crow, but distinctly colored and shaped with a typical woodpecker posture. Think Woody Woodpecker. The only woodpecker of comparable size is the rare, and probably extinct Ivorybill Woodpecker. Pileated's are up to 17 inches in length with large wingspans of 27 inches. Their backs and tails are black and **males have red cheek patches and a very large red crest on their head.** The female lacks the red cheek patches and her crest is less large. When in flight **white feathers flash on the underwings.** Their very strong bill is capable of chipping out pieces of wood the size of a fist when they are excavating or searching for food.

**Pileateds prefer both mature coniferous and deciduous forests or woodlots in valleys.** The more remote the better. Their **cavities are oval or rectangular shaped** at about 45' high, though they will nest higher or lower. The cavity itself may be as deep as two feet.

Only three to four eggs are deposited at the bottom of the cavity. Pileateds nest throughout the eastern U.S., but are still considered **uncommon birds.** Their drumming is loud, varying between rapid, slow and trailing off. Their call is a loud *wick-uh wick-uh wick-uh or kuk, kuk, kuk, kuk-kuk-kuk.*

Species like pileated woodpeckers are considered **keystone species.** This means that their behavior and presence within a habitat enables other species to live there. Without woodpeckers many species would suffer. The reason?

When you hear the echoing drumroll of a woodpecker sounding off against a tree, it is a sure sign they are actively seeking a mate and a new cavity is about to be created. **Each time a woodpecker breeds, it digs out a new cavity.** That means that empty cavities are left behind everywhere a woodpecker has been. **Over 36 species of birds, mammals and reptiles in PA need a cavity to nest in.** Most cannot create their own cavities. That's where the woodpecker comes in.





## Northern Flicker

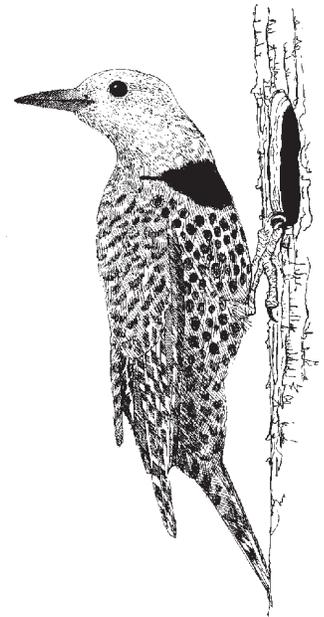
*Colaptes auratus*



Common Flickers are fairly large woodpeckers with wingspans up to 20 inches and body lengths of 8 – 10 inches. Easily identified by **spotted breasts with a black band high up on the breast, brown backs and bright red on the nape of the neck**. Only **males have a black “moustache” across their cheek** (left). Another distinct field mark is their white rump patch and yellow underwings displayed when they take flight. Flickers feed often from the ground.

**Ants are a favorite food and flickers have specialized saliva that neutralizes the formic acid found in ants.** Like other woodpeckers, flickers love the berries of poison ivy – helping to spread the plants. They prefer **open woodlands, orchards, and yards.**

It takes a flicker up to two weeks to dig a cavity from 2-60' off the ground. Up to 10 eggs are laid on wood chips at the base of the cavity and incubated for about 12 days before hatching. Their call is a flick or flicker, or a shrill, descending *kee-oo*. **Also known as the the yellow-shafted flicker** - referring to the color of the main stem of their feathers.





Red-Bellied Woodpeckers are similar in size to flickers and **red-bellied woodpeckers**. They are **often mistaken for a red-headed woodpecker**. They do have red on their heads, but just a small patch compared to the bold, red head of the red-headed.

The best fieldmark for a red-bellied is their “ladder back” or black and white bands across their backs. They do have **some red on the back of the neck with a blush of pink on their breast** – hence their name.

The male has a red cap and back of neck, while the female only has red on the neck. Usually four eggs are laid in a cavity between 5 – 70’ above ground. Their call is a rough *chuh chuh* or a rattling noise. These attractive birds are easily attracted to backyard bird feeders, especially if you offer suet blocks attached to a tree trunk.

## Red-bellied Woodpecker

*Melanerpes carolinus*



## Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

*Sphyrapicus varius*



Yellow-Bellied Sapsuckers are among our smallest woodpeckers at 8” long and a 14” wingspan. Their **narrow white wing stripes and black and white mottled back**, which help them camouflage against tree bark, are good field marks along with a **yellowish belly and red-tipped black & white head**. It is easy to know if you have an active Sapsucker on your property by looking for **parallel rows of holes drilled across a trunk**. They cleverly drill in live trees not only to drink the sap, but to eat small insects attracted to the sap.

Sapsuckers will also feed on tree cambium (the layer beneath the bark). Gourd-shaped cavities are built up to 40’ high in forests and orchards. **Trees with fungus are often chosen as nest sites because the softer, infected wood is easier to dig out**. Number of eggs and incubation is similar to red-headed woodpeckers. The sapsucker is our most migratory woodpeckers, rarely staying here in winter.

Their call sounds something like a blue jay. **Instead of drumming they tap in a distinct rhythm.**



## Downy Woodpecker

*Picoides pubescens*



**Both the hairy woodpecker (below) and downy woodpecker (above and at left) are almost identical in appearance** with a white stripe down the center of their backs, black wings flecked with white and white feathers on the outer edges of the tails and white breasts. Like most woodpeckers, males and females are similar in appearance, but **only the males have a small red patch on the back of their heads**. So how do you tell a hairy from a downy? The **hairy's bill is noticeably larger than the downy's**, and the hairy's outer tail feathers are solid black while the downy's are barred with black. The downy woodpecker is slightly smaller overall than the hairy woodpecker.

**They are both our smallest woodpeckers** at about six inches long with a wingspan of about 11 inches. After breeding, three to six eggs are placed at the base of a cavity as high as 50' up in a tree. Like all woodpeckers, they forage for wood-boring larvae, moths, beetles, ants, aphids, spiders, poison ivy and dogwood fruits, berries, corn, apples and acorns.



## Hairy Woodpecker

*Picoides villosus*





## A Simple Review of Woodpeckers



Ever wonder why a **woodpecker** makes so much noise when they **drum on wood** or the aluminum siding of your house? **They are trying to establish their territory.** Lots of birds sing to create their territory before they mate and raise their young. Woodpeckers drum. And the louder the better.

Once they have their territory they will drill into trees to create a nesting cavity. **Every time a woodpecker is ready to raise young it needs to create a new cavity somewhere else,** leaving the old cavity empty. This is good news for other animals that like to nest in cavities. Some cavity nesters don't have the ability to dig out their own cavity and are dependent on woodpeckers to create one for them.



**Woodpeckers also drill into trees to find their food.** Most feed on insects they find under the loose bark or inside the tree itself. But flickers feed on the ground in search of **insects** and sapsuckers drill into trees to release the flow of **sap**. As the syrupy liquid starts to ooze out insects are attracted to the sugar. The sapsuckers eat both the sap and the insects.

Woodpeckers have **long sharp bills** that help them **drill into wood**. They also have long tongues for **grasping insects** and **special cushioning around their skulls** so they can withstand the impact of constant drilling and drumming.

Most birds perch on tree branches, but **woodpeckers spend most of their time braced against a tree trunk.** Their tail feathers are fairly short and very strong, which lets them balance themselves as they hammer their head back and forth. And their **toes are turned so that two toes grasp above and two toes grasp below.** All of which helps them hold on to the side of a tree.



Sometimes you can identify which woodpecker is using a tree on your property by the size and shape of the hole it has created. Our largest woodpecker, the **pileated woodpecker makes rectangular-shaped cavities in a tree.**

Pileateds will make extra entrances so they have an escape route and **drill extra holes to allow sap to run** from the tree. This is thought to help **prevent black rat snakes from climbing their tree** in search of eggs or nestlings to eat.