

All wild birds are protected by state and federal laws, with the exception of the European starling, rock (feral) pigeon, and English sparrow. This means that you cannot shoot at, trap, poison, or otherwise kill, capture or possess one without a permit. However, there are many methods available to harass and prevent problems with birds that are damaging property.

WOODPECKERS

General characteristics

The downy and hairy woodpeckers are less than 10 inches in length. Their toes allow them to cling to trees, wood poles, and wood siding. Their strong, pointed beak is used to dig into trees for insects, and for “drumming.” Woodpeckers use sharp calls and perform rhythmic tapping (also known as drumming) with their beaks on surfaces such as dead tree limbs, metal poles, and building siding to attract a mate or announce their territorial boundaries. Both the downy and hairy woodpeckers have white backs and black and white-striped wing feathers. The hairy woodpecker is the size of a robin, whereas the downy woodpecker is sparrow-sized and has a short bill. In both species, the male has a red spot on the back of the head.

Distribution

Woodpeckers are found throughout Indiana. Downy, red-headed, and hairy woodpeckers are common in backyards as well as forested areas. Pileated woodpeckers are usually found only in forested areas, but can sometimes be seen at backyard birdfeeders near a woodlot.

Food Habits

Woodpeckers eat insects primarily, including carpenter ants, but will eat peanuts, sunflower seeds, suet from bird feeders, sap in trees, and a variety of seeds and nuts.

Prevention and Control

Woodpeckers are protected by both federal and state laws and cannot be captured or killed without a permit. However, many options have been known to effectively scare woodpeckers away or prevent them from causing damage. Keep in mind that it is best to try multiple methods to frighten the woodpeckers away and try to do so as soon as the woodpeckers begin causing the noise or damage.

Damage is likely to occur to cedar-sided buildings during the breeding season (March – May). Cone-shaped holes in siding may be several inches across and go as deep as the insulation. Cedar window fascia may also be damaged. Corners are often chipped off and smaller holes are excavated whereas holes caused by mammals usually have a ridged or gnawed appearance and are often located near overhangs or corners. In trees, woodpecker damage will be neat rows or ¼” holes spaced closely together, other individual peck-holes, and other holes with a shredded or ragged appearance.

Frighten the birds by banging pots, clapping hands, or honking horns.

Spray the bird with a water hose.

Hang high-reflective mylar tape (1/2" width) vertically over in front of your windows where damage is occurring and along the bottom of your gutters. Commercially available helium-filled mylar balloons (preferably silver); pinwheels, wind chimes, and noisy tin can lids can also be used in a similar manner. For balloons, tie them to a rock using fishing line or a strong string so that the head of the balloon bobs in the damaged area. Do not use mylar balloons where overhead power lines are present. Use mylar balloons or tape every year to prevent damage in addition to their use after damage has occurred.

Mount fine mesh netting, hardware cloth, sheet metal or screening from the outside of the eaves of your home and gutters to create a barrier where they cannot drum.

Cover the area where the woodpeckers are drumming with heavy (3+ mill) plastic sheeting. Stretch the plastic tight and attach it with staples, tape or another fastener. Woodpeckers cannot peck or drum if they cannot hang onto the surface of the structure.

Holes can be filled using wood filler, wood plugs, or silicone caulk. Temporary screening or metal flashing should be placed over the repaired areas to prevent additional damage. With severe damage, eaves, siding, or window facings may be covered with metal or vinyl siding.

Hanging a bird feeder with suet in a nearby tree may encourage the woodpecker to move there for food. Cutting down dead trees is not advised since the removal of these trees only removes nesting, drumming, and food sources and could cause them to move to your home instead.

You might also look for signs of insect infestations to see if the insects, a natural food source, are attracting the woodpeckers to your home. If so, you should contact a licensed pest control operator to remove the insects and eliminate future problems.

Plastic owls are not likely to scare a woodpecker away from your home.

For more information, go to: <http://extension.entm.purdue.edu/publications/ADM-5.pdf>, "Animal Damage Management – Woodpeckers" by Judy Loven, USDA-APHIS-Wildlife Services