

Woodpeckers

Understanding the habits and habitats of wildlife, and taking appropriate measures to prevent unwanted encounters, will help everyone to continue to enjoy the wonderful wild resources that still exist in New Jersey.

Coexisting with Woodpeckers

Where Do They Nest?

Some species, such as the sapsuckers (*Sphyrapicus*) and hairy woodpeckers (*Leuconotopicus villosus*), excavate holes in live trees. Others, such as flickers (*Colaptes*) and downy woodpeckers (*Picoides pubescens*), prefer to drill in dying trees or snags. In either case, the birds tunnel down six to eighteen inches deep, making the excavation wider at the bottom for the egg chamber.

Both male and female woodpeckers take turns incubating two to eight eggs. Hatchlings are naked and blind. Depending on the species, young leave the nest between 21 to 30 days after hatching.

What Do They Eat?

Woodpeckers use their beaks to chisel into wood for insects and sap. In the winter, woodpeckers will also visit backyard bird feeders for suet and seeds.

Coexisting with Woodpeckers

Occasionally, woodpeckers may cause damage to the outside of buildings and the sound of their drumming may be annoying to occupants inside. Before taking remedial action, determine which of the following reasons are causing their annoying behavior:

- **Territory** - Since resident woodpeckers drum against hard, resonant surfaces to proclaim their territory, they are likely to return to the same spot repeatedly during breeding season. This can become a problem when the site is a metal gutter, downspout, or wooden siding of a house and when the woodpecker pecks on it in the early morning. To discourage drumming, modify the surface of the chosen site by covering it with fabric or foam.



Plug small holes with caulking or wood filler and fill larger holes with wooden plugs, steel wool, or wire screen before sealing.

About Mercer County Wildlife Center

The Mercer County Wildlife Center is a state and federally licensed facility that cares for injured, ill and displaced wildlife. The Center provides these animals with the medical treatment and a temporary refuge before releasing them back into an appropriate wild habitat.

For more information regarding the work we do and the animals who share our environment, including a series of printable brochures that provide tips for coexisting peacefully with those animals, visit us online at:

www.mercercounty.org/departments/mercer-county-park-commission/wildlife-center

For information on protecting bee hives and livestock, contact the Division of Fish and Wildlife Wildlife Control Unit at (908) 735-8793.

- **Search for food** - If activity is not restricted to one site on a building, and if it occurs throughout the year, the birds are likely to be drilling for food. They are attracted to insect-infested wood where they can drill small holes into the surface to extract the insects. Repair the site as necessary.
- **Nesting, roosting, or caching food** - Woodpeckers may also drill cavities for nesting, roosting, or caching food. Look for round, deep openings, often near knot holes in boards. In the spring or summer, assume there is an active nest with eggs or hatchlings inside. Wait until you are sure all the birds have fledged and left the nest on their own, then immediately repair the openings. Plug small holes with caulking or wood filler and fill larger holes with wooden plugs, steel wool, or wire screen before sealing. At the first sign of activity, you can scare woodpeckers away from a site by making noises at a nearby window or against the adjacent inside wall. You can also hang strips of foil, fabric, or bird-scare tape (available in bird supply stores) from eaves to deter the birds;

How Woodpeckers are Built to Survive in Nature

- **Strong, sharp toes** - Well-adapted to living in trees, woodpeckers have four strong toes - two pointing forward and two back -with sharp claws that enable them to cling upright on the bark of trunks and branches. They also have stiff tail feathers to prop them up vertically.
- **Hard, pointed beak** - Woodpeckers use their beaks to chisel into wood in search of insects and sap or to excavate cavities for nesting and roosting. They also use their beaks to drum or tap out sounds during breeding season.
- **Thick skull** - Woodpeckers' skulls are protected from the concussive force of pounding by a narrow space around the brain that functions as a shock absorber.
- **Long, flexible, bristled, sticky tongue** - With their tongues, woodpeckers can probe small holes in wood to catch insects. In feeding, most woodpeckers start at the base of a tree, searching for insects and spiders, and then move up the tree in spirals until they reach the larger limbs where they explore the undersides of branches.



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