

First Sighting – Date: _____ Time: _____



Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*)

The largest of the woodpeckers in Northern Virginia, this species can be found throughout the year in wooded suburban and rural areas. Its black color and size are crow-like, but there's little mistaking its characteristic "rowing" flight, distinctive white stripes and red crest, and that unforgettable echoing call. All woodpeckers need trees, but for the pileated, bigger is better. Extensive mature woodlands with dead or decaying trees provide the food and shelter essential to its well-being. These are not timid birds; they often seem quite oblivious to their surroundings as they hammer away at dead wood. The future of this robust species is not assured, as local studies of its population during breeding season indicate some decline, probably because of the loss of the region's forests to suburban development and removal of standing dead trees.

What Pileated Woodpeckers Need

Food: These birds excavate insects like carpenter ants from decaying wood, either fallen or standing. Acorns, nuts, and native fruits round out their diet. Pileated pairs form permanent relationships and often forage together in a territory that can be 200 acres or more.

Breeding: Pileateds select wooded sites, often previously used trees near water, by early April. A new rectangular hole is opened for a single brood of 3-5 eggs that are incubated for 2-3 weeks. Both parents attend the nest. They forage as a family for several weeks following fledging.

Shelter: Mature woodlands, usually roosting in old nest holes.

Other: These large birds sometimes fancy wood-sided houses as places to excavate their own homes and can cause extensive damage if left to their own devices.

Resources:

Native plants and trees—nurseries like Nature by Design, Merrifield Garden Centers, DeBaggio Herbs, and Musser Forests, Inc

Suet and water devices—local wild bird stores

Model Pileated Woodpecker Habitats:

Riverbend Park—www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/riverbend/

Prince William Forest Park—www.nps.gov/prwi/

Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve—www.bansheereeks.org/

How You Can Help

- Leave dead trees standing whenever possible. If a dead tree is a threat to your or your neighbor's property, cut off the crown of the tree to remove the weight at the top. The more of the trunk you can leave in place the better it will serve as habitat for Pileated Woodpeckers and other local wildlife. Even a 12' snag will help!
- Plant blackberry, elderberry and serviceberry to provide fruits. Larger and slower growing oaks and hickories will bear acorns and nuts in the fall.
- Provide suet and a source of water, like a birdbath, to help them through the winter months.
- Trees, trees and more trees. Pileated Woodpeckers will benefit from a grove of mixed hardwoods from which to choose a nest site. Plant fast growing species like green ash, eastern cottonwood and tulip poplar to complement the slower acorn and nut producers listed above.
- Conserve natural roosting sites by leaving standing dead trees whenever possible and safe.
- Hang strips of aluminum foil or shiny metallic cellophane or plastic snakes in the problem areas. For a heavy duty solution, mount metal plates over the chosen pecking spot. Alternatively, mount a large bird box on the house as woodpeckers may move into them when they are determined to reside there.

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