



# Controlling woodpecker damage

Scott Craven

Woodpeckers are attractive, interesting visitors to bird feeders and yards. But they are not as harmless as they may appear. In fact, one of the most serious wildlife problems many homeowners face is a woodpecker hammering on the side of the house. Not only is the hammering annoying, but it can also cause considerable damage.

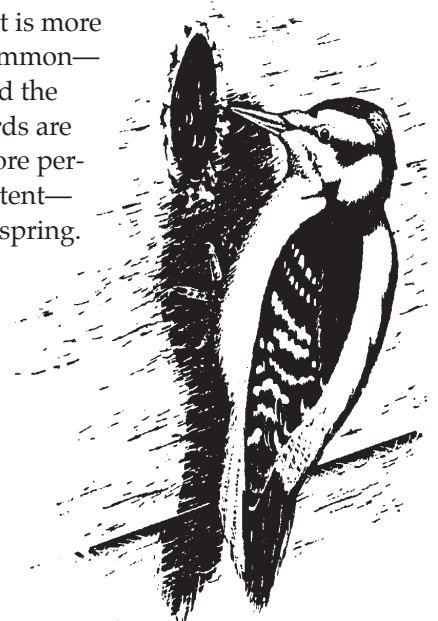
Woodpeckers may hammer holes completely through a home's siding and insulation. In some cases, they make holes large enough to provide nesting sites for other birds, especially house sparrows. There have been reports of homes damaged so badly that they needed complete residing. In other cases, woodpeckers have been known to damage almost every house in a wooded, suburban development.

Except for the yellow-bellied sapsucker, all woodpecker species in Wisconsin can damage houses. These include flickers, red-headed, red-bellied, downy and hairy woodpeckers. Even large pileated woodpeckers may, on rare occasions, damage houses. Recommended approaches to control are the same for all the species. Controlling sapsucker damage to trees is discussed in a separate section.

## When and why do woodpeckers damage houses?

Woodpecker damage may occur anytime of year but is most likely in spring and fall. Spring is the biggest damage season. During spring, male woodpeckers hammer as a territorial activity, much like other birds sing to advertise their territory and attract a mate. In the wild, woodpeckers hammer on trees. But in suburban areas some birds seem to prefer houses and drain spouts, perhaps because these structures produce a "better" sound. No one really knows why the birds are attracted to houses, but natural wood (especially cedar) siding, large size, and better sound may make houses seem like "super trees." Territorial hammering may also occur in fall,

but is more common—and the birds are more persistent—in spring.



Fall and winter damage often results when woodpeckers search for food, usually insects or insect larvae, in or under the siding. Certain types of plywood siding contain tunnels which are opened when the plywood is grooved (see diagram) to give the appearance of vertical boards. Insects, especially leaf-cutting bees, enter these tunnels for winter shelter or to lay eggs. If woodpecker holes are arranged in neat, regular rows, the insects inside the tunnels are probably attracting the woodpeckers.

Territorial hammering is usually concentrated in one spot and may also occur on drain spouts, TV antennas and other parts of the home. Several woodpeckers may feed on insects in plywood, but only one bird is usually involved in territorial behavior.

Some observers suspect that woodpecker damage may result from the birds simply getting some exercise or from red-headed woodpeckers storing acorns or other food items.

## Controlling damage

Woodpecker damage is unpredictable. A home located in a wooded setting may remain undamaged for many years and then suddenly have a problem. Likewise, problems may stop for no apparent reason.

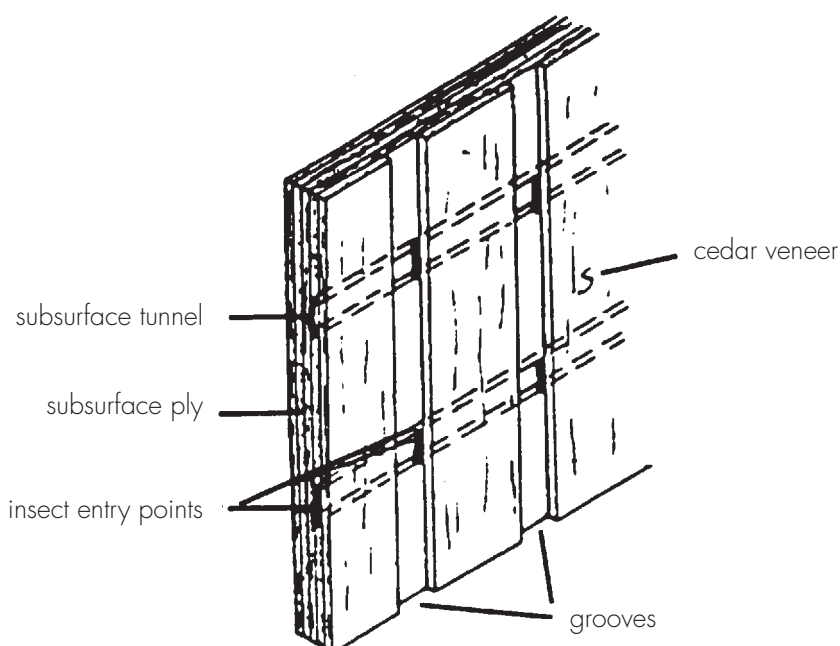
The key to successful control is to take action as soon as a woodpecker shows signs of becoming a pest. If a bird establishes its behavior pattern, it will be much more difficult to stop.

If insects in the siding seem to be the cause, you can eliminate that attraction by removing the insects. Caulk all the tunnels in the siding. Insecticides or wood preservatives may help in some situations, although getting an insecticide into the siding where it will kill the insects is usually difficult. Treating the siding with toxic wood preservatives also seems to repel woodpeckers as well as providing insecticidal and wood care benefits. Check

with your paint dealer about incorporating a wood preservative with a coat of stain. If the siding needs stain or paint, a heavy application of a thick latex-based product may clog the open tunnels and provide some resistance to insect infestation. To avoid such insect and woodpecker problems when building in a wooded area, consider using a different type of siding.

To discourage a troublesome woodpecker, regardless of why it is present, try several of the following techniques. Often a combination is more effective than one method alone.

- Scare the bird whenever you see it on the house. You can do this by shooting cap guns, banging on pots and pans, or yelling, but you must be persistent.
- Tack aluminum foil, mylar streamers or a child's pinwheel to the damaged area. The movement of these shiny objects seems to keep woodpeckers at a distance.
- Try to frighten the birds with beachball-sized inflatable scare devices that have recently been promoted to scare birds away. The bright color and shiny spots resembling eyes seem to have some deterrent value. Hang the balloons near damaged areas.
- Try to eliminate any ledges or cracks the woodpecker may use for a foothold as it hammers.
- Deaden the sound-producing properties of the spot where the bird is hammering by filling any hollow space beneath the siding.



- Cover the damaged area with screen, hardware cloth sheet metal, or bird netting (available at garden centers) until the bird has been discouraged. Drape large sheets of bird netting from an overhang to produce a curtain-like barrier that will protect a large section of the house.
- Put a rubber or plastic snake, an owl decoy (such as those used by crow hunters), or a cut-out silhouette of a hawk near the spot. If you don't have a convenient ledge or roof, you can hang the snake on the side of the house with a string or mount the owl on a pole. As these two examples suggest, you are limited only by your imagination when devising woodpecker-scaring tactics.

If the woodpecker persists in spite of your efforts, or if the damage is extreme, the woodpecker may have to be destroyed. **This is a last resort!**

Woodpeckers are protected by both state and federal laws; you will receive a stiff fine for killing one without a written permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. However, permits for killing damage-causing woodpeckers are available.

To obtain a permit application and more information, call or write:

U.S.D.A.–APHIS-ADC  
750 Windsor Street  
Sun Prairie, WI 53590  
Telephone: (608) 837-2727

The time required to process a permit request may vary; ask how long it will take when you apply. After you have the permit, the troublesome woodpecker can be killed legally. You can use a shotgun or .22 caliber rifle loaded with rat (or bird) shot. If gunfire is unsafe or illegal where you live, you can trap and kill the bird in a rattrap with a wooden base. Nail the trap with a piece of suet tied or wired to the trigger and place the trap with trigger down toward the ground.

**Make sure the trap is out of reach of children and pets.**

After you've discouraged or eliminated the offending woodpecker, repair any holes so they won't attract another woodpecker or other pests. If your problem seems to be unique, call a wildlife specialist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for personal advice.

## **Sapsucker damage**

The yellow-bellied sapsucker, as its name implies, drills into trees to obtain sap. In Wisconsin, sapsuckers favor birch, maple and hemlock trees, but the birds do not limit themselves to those species. Orchard trees and a number of ornamentals may also sustain damage. An individual sapsucker often picks a favorite tree and visits it repeatedly. Sapsucker damage can cause unsightly wounds to the tree and lead to disease and insect problems.

Sapsucker damage is much less serious than the damage to homes other species cause, and it is easier to control. To prevent injury from sapsuckers, wrap the damaged part of the tree with burlap or hardware cloth, or smear a sticky repellent such as "bird tanglefoot" on the trunk. Be careful with bird tanglefoot; other birds not responsible for the damage can get stuck in it.

For more information on sapsucker problems write for *How to Identify and Control Sapsucker Injury on Trees* from:

U.S. Forest Service  
North Central Forest Experiment  
Station  
Folwell Avenue  
St. Paul, MN 55108.

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