

WOODPECKERS

Integrated Pest Management for Home Gardeners and Landscape Professionals

Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes* spp.), including sapsuckers (*Sphyrapicus* spp.), and flickers (*Colaptes* spp.) belong to an interesting and well-known group of birds in the family Picidae. There are 17 species found in California, two of which are California-listed endangered species. Woodpeckers vary in size and range from about 7 to 14 inches in length, usually with brightly contrasting coloration. Most males have some red on the head, and black and white markings are common on many species. They have short legs with two sharp-clawed backward pointed toes and stiff tail feathers that serve as a support prop (Fig. 1). Such physical traits permit them to cling easily to trees or wood surfaces. They have stout, sharply pointed beaks and a long tongue for extracting larvae and other insects from wood crevices. Because they are dependent on trees for shelter and food, woodpeckers are commonly found within or on the fringes of wooded or forested areas.

BIOLOGY AND BEHAVIOR

Woodpeckers come into conflict with people when they use human dwellings in their search of food, or as a surface for territorial/social drumming, or for nest construction. Such activities not only create disturbing noises but, more significantly, may cause structural damage. Pecking damage can occur on wooden siding, eaves, or trim boards. Cedar and redwood siding seem most vulnerable, especially rough-hewn veneer-type plywood. Reverse board-and-batten veneer plywood is especially prone because of gaps created as a result of the manufacturing process. These gaps provide hidden spaces that harbor insects, which in turn, attract woodpeckers in search of food. When searching for insects, woodpeckers leave a series of small holes all in a row, which is characteristic damage.

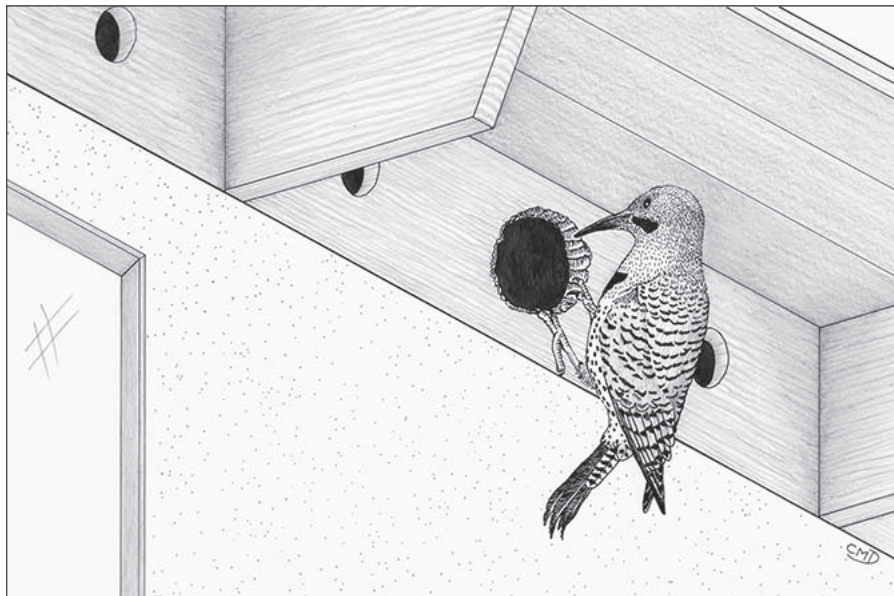


Figure 1. Northern red-shafted flicker, *Colaptes auratus* under the eaves of a building pecking at unprotected vents. Such activity may be prevented by installation of 1/4-inch hardware cloth.

Woodpeckers will also peck larger holes in wood siding to create nests in the wall cavity. Exploratory pecking is commonplace. The damage tends to be on houses in or near natural wooded areas and most often occurs in suburban or rural settings.

Part of a woodpecker's breeding behavior is an incessant rhythmic tapping or repetitive drumming on wood or other hard surfaces using the bill as a way of proclaiming breeding territory and social significance. Woodpeckers prefer drumming surfaces that resonate loudly. They frequently bypass wood and use metal gutters and downspouts, television antennae, or metal rooftop ventilators. Both male and female woodpeckers drum. This activity may be annoying to household residents, especially if it starts in the early morning hours.

Gardeners and landscapers are sometimes confronted with a series of small holes in rows pecked through the bark of a tree trunk or tree limb by a sapsucker seeking food (see Fig. 2). Over time, this continuous activity extends the number of rows of holes and the resulting loss of sap may weaken the tree and provide access for harmful insects or plant diseases. Some species of woodpeckers feed on fruits, berries, and nuts, but crop damage rarely constitutes a significant problem.

Acorn woodpeckers place numerous acorns in holes they drill in buildings, wooden fence posts, utility poles, and old tree snags. The acorn woodpecker may also take a quicker approach and wedge acorns beneath wooden shakes or shingles and, in the process, be very destructive. Acorn woodpeckers may accumulate and store hundreds to thousands of acorns in a single season.

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LEGAL STATUS

All woodpeckers are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 as migratory insectivorous birds and are classified as non-game by the state. Two California woodpeckers (Gila woodpecker, *Melanerpes uropygialis*, and Gilded northern flicker, *Colaptes auratus chrysoides*) are California-listed endangered species and are offered greater protection. When warranted, woodpeckers other than endangered species can be killed, but only under a permit issued by the Law Enforcement Division of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service upon recommendation of the United States Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA-APHIS) Wildlife Services personnel. Generally there must be a good case to justify a permit and the permit process is time consuming. Control methods that do not harm the bird or its active nest are allowed except for the two endangered species. Those species cannot be harassed or bothered in any way. Physical exclusion, if installed before the endangered species is in the area, is allowed. For more information on these and other endangered species, see the California Department of Fish and Game Website, www.dfg.ca.gov/; or contact the main office of USDA-APHIS Wildlife



Figure 2. Sapsucker seeking food.

Services in your state; online see www.aphis.usda.gov/ws/.

MANAGEMENT

Several methods have been used to prevent damage or to frighten woodpeckers from a site. Physical exclusion is by far the most effective. More often than not, frightening devices or repellents fail to provide the desired result.

Physical Exclusion

Installing bird-type netting to prevent woodpeckers from gaining access to wood siding or other wood surfaces is the most effective method to stop building damage. The lightweight, plastic, 3/4-inch mesh is stretched from the eaves to a lower point on the building (see Fig. 3 and 4). Alternatively, the netting can be stretched over any flat surface subject to damage, leaving at least three inches of space between the netting and damaged surface so that the birds cannot cause further damage through the mesh. If the appropriate type and color of netting is selected and properly installed, it is barely visible from a distance of a few yards and will offer a long-term solution to prevent subsequent damage. Remember that you may have to net the entire side of a building; otherwise the woodpecker may move just beyond the netted area and continue its activities.

If a plastic net is used, it should be attached so that it can be pulled taut. This prevents flapping in the wind, which looks unsightly and results in tangles or breakage at mounting points. The net should not have any loose pockets or wrinkles that could trap and entangle birds.

Netting can be attached using tape, staples, or hooks on the eaves and the side of the building. An advantage of hooks is that the net can be taken down for maintenance of light fixtures, painting, etc. If staples are used, they should be rust-resistant to avoid unsightly rust stains on the building. When using hooks, a supporting framework of wooden dowels, wood laths, or metal rods along the netting edges will ease attachment and cre-

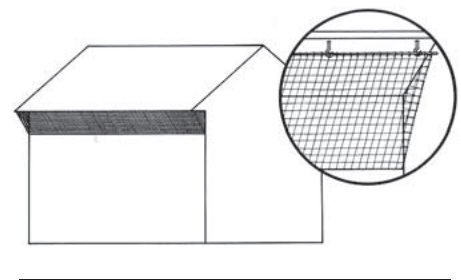


Figure 3. Mount netting from the outer edge of the eaves down to the side of the building. Insert shows one method of attachment using hooks and wooden dowels.

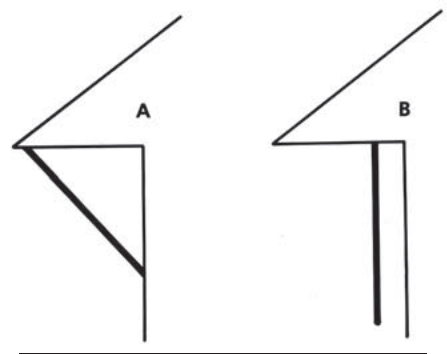


Figure 4. Two methods of attaching 3/4-inch bird netting to prevent woodpecker damage to the side of a building. A: The netting is stretched from the outer edge of the eaves and back to the building. B: Shows a curtain of netting stretched parallel to the side of the building.

ate uniform tension on the net. Netting may also be wrapped once or twice around wood laths and nailed directly to the building. It should extend from the outer eaves edge down the side of the building to the point where the eaves' protection from the elements is lost.

Extensive netting may be a bigger task than some homeowners want to assume, especially if it involves a two-story building. In this case, it may be advisable to call a bird control professional; look under "pest control" in the telephone book. Netting is increasingly used to curtail woodpecker damage because it consistently provides the desired result.

Sections of lightweight sheet metal or 1/4-inch hardware cloth may be fastened directly over the woodpecker-

damaged areas. If done at the first sign of damage the bird may be discouraged and move on to another location. This metal sheeting or wire mesh can be painted to match the siding. This method is most useful where only one or a few relatively small areas have been damaged.

Wire mesh, such as chicken wire, wrapped around tree trunks or limbs being damaged by a sapsucker will often persuade the bird to relocate. In most cases, it will be necessary to protect a large area with mesh because the woodpecker will move to a nearby area and begin pecking again.

Bird netting is available at many hardware and farm supply stores as well as from Internet sources.

For more information contact the University of California Cooperative Extension or agricultural commissioner's office in your county. See your phone book for addresses and phone numbers.

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To simplify information, trade names of products have been used. No endorsement of named products is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products that are not mentioned.

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Frightening Devices

Models of hawks, owls, and snakes are ineffective as frightening devices. Plastic twirlers or windmills fastened to the eaves, and aluminum foil or brightly-colored plastic strips hung from above repel by movement and reflection and have been used with inconsistent success. Various other gadgets or devices are marketed for frightening woodpeckers, including a sound-activated giant model of a climbing spider. Some claim that various frightening devices resolved their particular problem. This is possible only if the woodpecker has not become well-attached to that particular location. Once established, woodpeckers are persistent and are not easily driven from their territory or selected pecking site.

Repellents

Many chemicals having objectionable tastes or odors have been tested for repelling woodpeckers with little or no success. This search continues and in the future something effective may be found.

On buildings sticky or tacky bird repellents such as Tanglefoot are sometimes effective if applied to sections of thin plywood and placed over the damaged area. The substances do not entrap the birds, but they dislike the tacky footing.

Applying sticky or tacky bird repellents can sometimes be an effective

solution to the problem of sapsucker attacks on trees

Other Control Methods

Woodpeckers can only be removed with a permit specifying trapping or shooting as the control method.

Other methods that are sometimes suggested include feeding suet to the woodpecker in the hope of discouraging damage. Placing nest boxes on nearby buildings, poles, or trees has also been advised, but there is no consistent information on whether providing food or nesting boxes serves to reduce the problem. They may, in fact, serve as attractants, favoring an increase in woodpecker numbers.

MONITORING GUIDELINES

Woodpeckers, like many other birds, are so visible that little specific monitoring information is needed. In the case of woodpeckers, they may be heard pecking and drumming even before they are seen. Hearing their activity over several consecutive days is a cue to make a visual inspection. Vacation homes in forested areas should be checked for damage several times during the spring and summer.

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WARNING ON THE USE OF CHEMICALS

Pesticides are poisonous. Always read and carefully follow all precautions and safety recommendations given on the container label. Store all chemicals in the original labeled containers in a locked cabinet or shed, away from food or feeds, and out of the reach of children, unauthorized persons, pets, and livestock.

Confine chemicals to the property being treated. Avoid drift onto neighboring properties, especially gardens containing fruits or vegetables ready to be picked.

Do not place containers containing pesticide in the trash or pour pesticides down sink or toilet. Either use the pesticide according to the label or take unwanted pesticides to a Household Hazardous Waste Collection site. Contact your county agricultural commissioner for additional information on safe container disposal and for the location of the Household Hazardous Waste Collection site nearest you. Dispose of empty containers by following label directions. Never reuse or burn the containers or dispose of them in such a manner that they may contaminate water supplies or natural waterways.

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