

The sounds of woodpeckers are approaching



**Tips from the Posse**  
By Mark Rackay

This past fall, I was on a hike in a heavily wooded area of the Uncompahgre Plateau, near the Spring Creek trail. I had gone cross-country for a while to get a better look at an area I had not been in before. The hammering sound of a woodpecker beating away on a tree interrupted my solitude. That sound triggered some memories from my childhood. Over the many decades of my clomping around in the great outdoors, I have had encounters with just about every animal you can think of, even the woodpecker. My first encounter with a woodpecker happened when I was around six years old. I had discovered “Woody Woodpecker,” the famous cartoon character, as he made an appearance on my Saturday morning cartoons. What I remember most about Woody was his incredibly annoying laugh. I tried to mimic that laugh for hours, much to the dismay of my grandmother who raised me. Fortunately, I outgrew that annoying stage rapidly, with a little encouragement from my grandfather (knock it off.)

The second memorable encounter was with a woodpecker that resided near a summer cabin my family owned, deep in the north woods. Seems that this particular woodpecker was either mentally imbalanced, or a master at annoying people, or both.

This little bird had found a metal sign posted on a back portion of our property. The bird would bang away incessantly for hours on that metal sign. The sound broke the solitude we were all seeking, and he drove my grandfather crazy. The woodpecker stayed around all summer, beating on the sign, and when we took down the sign, he simply found another. The harsh winter must have done him in because he did not return the next summer.

There are over 200 species of woodpeckers found worldwide and about seven are common in Colorado. By far, the most common woodpecker found in our State is the northern flicker or Colaptes auratus for the science minded among us.

This species is identified in flight by a yellow or salmon tint under the wings and tail feathers. They have black spots on a tan and white breast and belly. Males have a black or red mustache extending from the gape of the beak to below the eyes.

Flickers stand 7 to 15 inches tall; have short legs and very sharp claws, and stiff tails. Most woodpeckers feed on wood, boring insects, insects on trees, vegetable matter, berries and tree sap.

Woodpeckers make a drumming sound as they tap on trees, and the occasional metal sign. During the spring, woodpeckers hammer away to attract mates, establish a territory, and to excavate a nesting site. Sometimes the tapping is to search for insects and other times, it is just to show off.

These birds especially like to hammer on wooden shingles, cedar and other wood siding, redwood, gutters of all types, antennas, light posts, and just about anything that will produce loud and hollow sounds. This hammering is most common during the early morning hours or late afternoons and usually stops by mid summer.

All woodpeckers are cavity nesters that excavate their own cavities. Oc-



A northern flicker. (Submitted photo/Mark Rackay)

asionally they will nest in an existing nest but prefer to make their own. They require dead or dying trees to excavate their nests. Once a nest is built, the birds will defend their territory vigorously against all invaders.

Everything is not peaceful and enjoyable with the woodpecker as they can cause serious damage to homes. Woodpeckers will drill holes in wood and synthetic siding, eaves, and just about any available wood structure that makes a hollow sound. It is not uncommon to see hundreds of these drill holes on a wood shingled roof.

If you are one of the unlucky homeowners who are experiencing damage from woodpeckers, there are a few things you can do. Visual repellents and loud noises are an example of the deterrents used.

Hawk silhouette mobiles are the most common visual repellents used. The mobiles should have a wing span of 2 feet, and a length of a foot, and be constructed out of cardboard, wood or styrofoam. Paint them black and hang them with monofilament fishing line from the eaves near the damaged area.

Black plastic strips, 2 inches wide and several feet long, as well as pinwheels, reflective vanes or aluminum pie plates may also be used. The idea is to use several of these devices together, in an attempt to frighten away the nuisance birds. The plastic owls, often used on boats, do not seem to have any effect on woodpeckers.

Loud noises also have sometimes worked at frightening away nuisance woodpeckers. Banging pots and pans together, loud whistles or toy cap guns are often used. Some people report that yelling works, but my grandfather had no success with that method on the bird that annoyed him.

As our communities grow, the available dead snags and trees needed for Flicker nesting diminish. Some folks have begun building nesting boxes. Place a cavity-type nesting box on a building in the vicinity of woodpecker damage.

These boxes should be constructed

from wood with a 2½-inch diameter entrance hole 20 inches above the floor inside. The total height should be 26 inches and hang about 10 to 20 feet above the ground. Fill the box with sawdust to encourage the bird to excavate it. Place the box close to the damaged area and cover all holes drilled previously by woodpeckers.

Before you try lethal methods of woodpecker control, know that woodpeckers are classified as migratory nongame birds and are protected by the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act. A federal permit is required before any lethal methods of woodpecker control are used.

Remember that the hammering season for woodpeckers is short, usually

ending by July. As for myself, I enjoy the hammering sound the birds make, as long as it is in the woods and not at my house. I don’t need another sign pounder in my lifetime because the noise was unbearable. Not the noise from the bird, but from my grandfather’s constant yelling at the thing.

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