

Woodpeckers (family Picidae)

Species that are more likely to cause nuisances in New York:

- Downy woodpecker, *Picoides pubescens*
- Hairy woodpecker, *Picoides villosus*
- Yellow-bellied sapsucker, *Sphyrapicus varius*
- Red-bellied woodpecker, *Melanerpes carolinus*
- Northern (a.k.a. “common”) flicker, *Colaptes auratus*
- Pileated woodpecker, *Dryocopus pileatus*

Size:

The downy woodpecker is the smallest, at 6½”. The sapsucker and the hairy woodpecker are both 8–9½” (hairy looks like a larger version of the downy). The red-bellied woodpecker is 9–10 ½”, and the flicker is 12–14.” The pileated is the largest, about the size of a crow, at 16–19½”.

Signs of their presence:

- The bird itself is the most obvious sign.
- Sounds: drumming, drilling, and calls. The sound of the cartoon character, Woody Woodpecker, was based on the call of the pileated woodpecker.
- Holes in trees, utility poles, and buildings.

Diet:

Mostly wood-boring insects, but they’ll also eat berries, beech nuts, acorns, seeds, fruits, and suet. Sapsuckers also feed on tree sap (surprise) and the inner bark of trees. Poison ivy berries are a winter staple for them. Woodpeckers eat insect pests, such as carpenter ants (a winter staple for the pileated), woodboring ants and beetles, bark lice, wasps, and carpenter bees. Flickers feed on ants on the ground. The other woodpeckers feed on trees. Red-bellied woodpeckers cache food.

Typical activity patterns:

Social style: Pairs may interact for about half the year.

Daily activity: Diurnal, with peaks at dawn and dusk.

Hibernator? No.

Migrates? Downy, hairy, red-bellied, and pileated woodpeckers remain in New York all year. Flickers in northern New York migrate, but those in the southern regions remain. The sapsucker migrates.

Where found:

Distribution in NY and the Northeast: Widespread in New York, but abundance varies by species.

Habitat: Open mixed woods with dead trees (some prefer bottomlands), woodland edges, orchards, rural, suburban, and urban areas with trees (especially if

there’s a good supply of suet), parks. Some woodpeckers use wooded swamps, fields and meadows, and some need large trees. The pileated likes a larger area that combines second-growth and mature trees, often near a river or wooded swamp. Red-bellied woodpeckers prefer to nest in dead limbs in living trees, competing with starlings for these cavities. Sapsuckers prefer to nest in aspens, and in trees with rotten heartwood. Some woodpeckers create new cavities each year (downy and hairy) while others reuse their holes (flicker).

Territory and home range: Most are territorial just in a small area around their nests.

Breeding habits:

Pair bonding style: Monogamous.

Breeding dates: April–June.

Egg-laying dates: April–June. May have 2–3 broods/yr.

Clutch size: 3–7, usually 4–5.

Incubation lasts: 11–18 days.

Fledging dates: 20–30 days after the eggs are laid.

Amount of time young remain with parents beyond fledging date: Downy woodpeckers stay with their parents for 3 weeks after fledging. Hairy woodpeckers feed their young for a few days after they fledge. The young leave as soon as they can feed themselves.

Common nuisance situations:

Time of year: Most damage occurs from March through June. In the early spring, they drum to proclaim their territories and attract mates. Then they’ll create nest cavities. From summer through fall, they seek insects and roosting sites. They may forage, nest, or roost in buildings.

- Buildings that are near wooded areas with high woodpecker populations are more vulnerable.
- They prefer cedar and redwood siding but will damage pine, fir, and other woods.
- They don’t often damage composite wood or Masonite.
- Untreated or stained wood is preferred over painted wood.
- Wood painted in earth tones (dark brown, red, or green) is more attractive to them than white, pastel, or brightly colored wood.
- Try to distinguish between the signs of woodpecker drumming and feeding. Why? Drumming will stop on its own and generally causes little damage. Foraging can cause more damage, and it means that the building is infested with insects, usually carpenter bees, leaf-cutter bees, or grass

bagworms. Ask customers about the noise. A rapid-fire, loud, and continuous drill—or any banging on metal—is the sign of drumming, which only happens in the spring. They don't excavate any wood while drumming. When woodpeckers search for insects, the sound is often a bit more sporadic and may be quieter.

What are they doing?

- **Drumming.** In the spring, woodpeckers will peck on a variety of resonant objects, such as a hollow or dry tree; aluminum siding; metal roofs, gutters, drainpipes, chimneys, chimney caps, vents, stove and pipes; cars; canoes; mailboxes; garbage cans; the trim and fascia boards of a wood, brick, or stucco building; and even metal road signs. Drumming may leave small, shallow dents in wood, usually no more than 1" across. Look for the dents clustered along the corners of buildings, or on the trim or fascia boards. Some people may find the noise annoying.
- **Chiseling foraging holes in wooden buildings** (siding, eaves, trim boards, even window frames) or utility poles. Certain building materials are more prone to insect invasion, such as grooved plywood siding (a.k.a. "T-111," a mimic of board-and-batten siding), so they're more vulnerable to woodpecker damage, too. Woodpeckers also prefer anything made of cedar.
 - In T-111, look for this sign of woodpecker feeding damage: horizontal rows of small holes across the siding or the fascia.
 - Cedar clapboards, resawn shakes, tongue-and-groove, or board-and-batten siding: very small holes clustered on the fascia boards (could also be caused by drumming).
 - Cedar shakes or shingles: in addition to the very small holes clustered on the fascia boards, you may see: vertical rows of 3–6 small holes that follow the crack between two shingles up into the overlapping shingle; or large and small holes along the corners of the building, at the bottom of the shingle; or holes clustered near wires, which the woodpeckers used as perches.
- **Drilling larger holes into wooden buildings** to create roosts and nests. These holes are usually only slightly wider than the bird, and are either round, rectangular, or gourd-shaped. They seem to prefer a hard outer shell and soft inner cavity, which they usually find in a dead tree—or cedar

building. They will drill into the insulation, in which they'll hollow out their nest or roost. Woodpeckers often create several holes before settling down to business. Nesting holes are excavated late April–May. Roosts are usually created in the late summer through fall, as the birds prepare for winter. Woodpeckers are more likely to excavate roosts and nests in buildings with board-and-batten, clapboard, or tongue-and-groove siding than those with shingles or shakes.

- **In cedar clapboards:** nest and roost holes are usually drilled on the seam between two clapboards, and may be found throughout the siding.
- **In board-and-batten:** these holes are usually seen on the batten between two boards, throughout the siding (some preference for corners).
- **In tongue-and-groove:** corner holes are more typical, but you may see at the seam of two boards.
- **In resawn shakes and shingles:** generally, corner holes, usually between two shingles, where the top and bottom meet.
- **Sapsuckers** may also feed on ornamental or fruit trees, boring a series of small holes ($1/4$ – $3/8$ "") in parallel rows in the trunks or branches of healthy trees. (Nearby trees of the same species may be left untouched.) These holes sometimes girdle the tree, and create wounds that may be invaded by insects or diseases.
- **Woodpeckers** will sometimes feed on fruits and nuts from orchards and backyard trees, but this isn't much of a problem in the northeast.

Legal status in New York:

Federally protected migratory birds (under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act).

Best practices

- If your customer plans on building in a forested suburb or rural area, or in an area that's suffered previous woodpecker damage, tell them to use brick, aluminum, vinyl, stone, or steel siding when possible.
- For better results, begin your control program as soon as damage starts.

To stop drumming:

- First, talk to your customers. The simplest solution is to live with the noise. Padding placed behind the area where the birds drum will soften the noise. The drumming will stop.
- Hang strips of aluminum foil or mylar tape (3–4" wide, 4 feet long) mirrors, aluminum pie tins, or a handheld windmill (kid's toy) in the area that's been damaged. The strips need to hang freely so they can blow in the wind. Brightly colored wind socks can be hung at the corners of the building.
- Play woodpecker distress calls, followed by the call of a predator, such as a sharp-shinned hawk (BirdGard® offers an electronic system). Playing a radio, banging on pots and pans, shouting, using noisemakers, or spraying them with water from a garden hose may work.
- Hawk or owl models and scare-eye balloons can be mounted over the site. Models that move in the wind are generally more effective.
- Attach lightweight nylon or plastic bird netting or 1/4" hardware cloth to the outer edge of the eaves, and then angle it down and attach it to the wood siding. The netting needs to hang out at least 3" from the building, or the woodpeckers will be able to reach through it.
- To seal a hole in siding and stop more damage: cover with flashing (aluminum sheets) soon after damage has begun.

To stop foraging:

- You must get rid of the insects and prevent them from re-infesting the building. First, remove any insects. Then seal the gaps that let them in. Paint the siding for even more protection—better to use white, pastels, or bright colors—avoid those dark brown, red, and green earth tones. Use an oil-based paint or polyurethane to seal gaps and create a hard finish that deters carpenter bees.
- Board-and-batten: run a wire through the gaps to remove any insects. Then seal the gaps with wood putty or caulk.
- Cedar siding: remove loose knots, then fill holes with wood putty.
- T-111: scrape along the vertical grooves to remove any bugs, then caulk along the grooves. Painting the siding helps a lot.
- Shakes/shingles: a tough situation! It's hard to prevent insect infestations in a shingled building, and to remove the bugs. The house can be sprayed with pesticides by someone with a commercial

pesticide applicator license. Replace damaged shingles. Frightening techniques may keep woodpeckers away.

- Holes and tunnels made by carpenter bees can be sealed with cork, wooden dowels, or wood putty.
- To seal a hole in siding and stop more damage: cover with flashing (aluminum sheets) soon after damage has begun.
- Attach lightweight nylon or plastic bird netting or 1/4" hardware cloth to the outer edge of the eaves, and then angle it down and attach it to the wood siding. The netting needs to hang out at least 3" from the building, or the woodpeckers will be able to reach through it.
- Drape bird netting over the canopy and trunk of a small tree that's suffering from sapsucker damage. For larger trees, loosely wrap 1/4" hardware cloth or burlap around the trunk or limbs. If the damage is caused by one of the other species, remember that they are after insects, not sap. Downy, hairy, red-bellied and pileated woodpeckers, and the northern flicker, don't generally create holes in healthy trees.

To stop nesting and roosting:

- Frighten the woodpeckers away from the building as soon as you hear them begin to drill the hole. Follow the tips in the section on drumming.
- If they're not nesting yet, seal all the holes (of course, make sure the birds aren't inside before you start).
- If they're already nesting, wait until the young fledge (usually, mid-summer), then seal the holes.

Preferred killing methods:

Any lethal strategy requires a federal depredation permit from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and then a state permit from the DEC. Follow the conditions on your federal permit. Preferred techniques include: CO₂ chamber; shooting; and stunning followed by cervical dislocation, chest compression, or decapitation

Control strategies that don't work particularly well, or aren't legal in New York:

- Ultrasonics don't work. Birds can't hear them.
- No pesticides (including repellents) are registered for use against woodpeckers on buildings or trees.

For more information:

- Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology website, at: www.birds.cornell.edu/wp_about/