

WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

WILDLIFE FACT SHEET

Dealing with Woodpecker Problems

Woodpeckers cause problems around homes primarily due to drumming and drilling activities. Both are related to breeding and territorial behavior and may occur in fall or spring. Spring is the most active period as woodpeckers are both drumming and drilling. Drumming by the male is a territorial behavior done to attract a mate and establish a territory. Male woodpeckers drum on resonate surfaces by “lightly” tapping with their bill to create a fast, reverberating drumming sound. Typically, the drumming surface is a hollow tree, but woodpeckers may also use metal gutters, chimney flashing, or aluminum or wood siding. Drumming rarely results in any significant damage to the home, but it can be an annoyance for the human occupants that may last for several weeks in early spring. The drilling of holes in siding, eaves, and fascia areas of natural wood-sided homes is also believed to be closely associated with breeding activity and reports of woodpeckers successfully nesting in walls of homes is not uncommon. Woodpeckers are attracted to natural, dark-stained, unpainted cedar and redwood siding but may also damage pine, fir, and stucco-sided homes. Complaints often involve woodpeckers excavating numerous holes, usually near the eaves and sometimes on more than one side of the house. Hole drilling in houses also increases in fall as the holes may serve as winter roost cavities.

In some cases, woodpeckers may damage homes because of feeding behavior. Damage consisting of long, narrow furrows following horizontal or vertical seams or along window frames is evidence of woodpeckers searching for insects such as wood boring bees, carpenter ants, wasps, or other insects that bore into the wood or find these cracks attractive for shelter. This searching behavior by woodpeckers may or may not indicate the presence of insect pests but results in damage nonetheless.

Woodpecker damage is sometimes difficult to control. Being territorial and remaining in their home range for most of the year, many common species of woodpeckers, such as downy, hairy, and northern flickers, become habituated to living among homes and are naturally attracted to ones with natural wood exteriors and occasionally stucco. In some cases, damage is limited to a few small holes and occurs during the few weeks of the spring breeding season. In other cases, damage can be substantial, occurring in both spring and fall, with numerous holes reaching up to 2-3 inches in diameter. Homes experiencing the most damage may be unoccupied for long periods or owners fail to notice the damage and the seasonal pattern repeats, leading to greater and greater damage.

Recommended Woodpecker Control Methods

Frightening: One of the first and easiest methods of controlling woodpecker damage involves frightening the birds using visual deterrents supplemented with loud noise. It may be effective, although often temporarily, to hang shiny and flashy or threatening-looking objects that move, such as bird “flash” tape, bird control balloons, wind socks, pie plates, compact discs, or plastic twirlers. Numerous sections of flash tape that have been twisted into spirals can be hung from the eaves or siding and then attached at the ends so the wind causes them to twist. The reflection from the flashes of light and twisting movement may scare woodpeckers from that area. The use of stationary model owls are not usually effective as the woodpeckers quickly learn they are not “real” threats.

Supplementing visual deterrents with the use of loud noise may also aversively condition woodpeckers to avoid the area. Sharp, loud noises such as hand or board clapping, and shooting a starter or cap pistol may be frightening to these birds.

The use of distress calls to control woodpecker damage may be a worthwhile consideration. Electronic distress call systems use a recording of a woodpecker in distress followed by the call of a predator, such as a sharp-shinned hawk. The calls are broadcast through a speaker at various intervals to frighten woodpeckers away from the house. Another option is to attach a movement detector to damaged areas that makes noise when it senses movement.

Other Preventive Measures: The use of bird netting or protective aluminum or vinyl siding is recommended for homes that are experiencing repeated damage from woodpeckers. Both of these methods provide a permanent long-term solution to damage. Bird netting can be attached to the eaves and angled back to the siding below the damaged area. When installed properly, netting is barely visible from a distance. Hollow wooden columns can be covered in metal sheathing, or fascia and trim boards can be protected by metal flashing painted to match.

In all cases where woodpeckers have caused hole damage, it is recommended that holes be covered promptly with sheet metal or fine hardware cloth to reduce their attractiveness and help with any frightening efforts. It is also necessary, as part of a long-term solution, to make permanent repairs to any holes (i.e., plugging holes with wood putty).

Keeping a feeder full of suet may draw woodpeckers away from the house. However, do not put out suet during the hot summer months because it may become sticky and adhere to a bird's plumage.

You may want to think twice before cutting down dead and decaying trees on your property. These trees supply woodpeckers with nesting, drumming, and food sites. However, if a dead tree poses a safety hazard to people and buildings, it should be removed.

Sticky repellents are not recommended as they can get on a bird's plumage, impairing its ability to fly and stay warm. Moreover, they can darken and stain wood siding and cause dirt to stick to the surface where they are applied.

Removal of woodpeckers causing severe property damage, either through trapping or shooting, is sometimes justified but can only legally be done with a federal depredation permit issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In situations where non-lethal attempts

to control damages have been attempted and failed and damages are substantial, a permit to trap or shoot a limited number of woodpeckers may be obtained. Further information on the use of trapping or shooting as woodpecker control methods may be obtained by contacting the Wildlife Division's main office at (860) 424-3011 or by contacting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at (413) 253-8641 or www.fws.gov.

Sources of Information:

Cornell Lab of Ornithology (www.birds.cornell.edu)

Colorado State University Cooperative Extension (www.ext.colostate.edu)

University of Nebraska - Lincoln Cooperative Extension Division (*Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage – 1994*; <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/icwdmhandbook/75>)

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (www.fws.gov)



State of Connecticut
Department of Environmental Protection
Bureau of Natural Resources
Wildlife Division
www.ct.gov/dep



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