



Woodpeckers – Inflicting Damage on Property



Female Hairy woodpecker at the opening of a nest cavity. Donna Dewhurst/USFWS

Why are they drumming on my property?

Woodpeckers, sapsuckers, and flickers drum and drill on a variety of surfaces. Siding (aluminum or wood), trim boards, and wood boards on any kind of structure can be appealing to woodpeckers. The resulting damage can appear as simple dents (usually a line) or as large as 2-inch diameter holes. Woodpeckers drum and drill in their search for food, territorial and social displays, and to nest in the cavities created. Sapsuckers drill small holes for sap, while many other woodpeckers drill for woodboring insects such as carpenter bees, leafcutter bees, grass bagworms, etc. Drumming for territory or social reasons will most likely occur in the early spring at the start of the breeding season. Drilling for nest cavities usually occurs in the early spring, although some drilling occurs in the fall.

Legal Status

All woodpeckers are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA). This law states: “No person may take (kill), possess, import, export, transport, sell, purchase, barter, or offer for sale, any migratory bird, or the parts, nests, or eggs of such bird except as may be permitted under the terms of a valid permit...”



Red-bellied woodpecker
Laura Perlick/USFWS

The Gila woodpecker (*Melanerpes uropygialis*) and Gilded flicker (*Colaptes chrysoides*) are California-listed endangered species and cannot be harassed or harmed without authorization from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Harassment of other woodpeckers, as with most migratory birds (except eagles and those listed under the Endangered Species Act), is legal.

How do I keep woodpeckers from damaging my property?

The best way to stop woodpecker damage to personal property is to begin damage control as soon as you begin hearing drumming and continuing until well after the woodpecker leaves the area. Holes the bird has made should be filled and painted immediately. If a nest is already active, we recommend that control measures be postponed until the young leave the nest permanently, which is usually around midsummer, but can vary depending on the species.

Physical exclusion is probably the most effective control method. Installing bird-netting from the outer eaves down the side of the building is typically effective at excluding most woodpeckers.



Acorn woodpecker grainery
Tupper Blake/USFWS

Other methods include:

- Frightening devices (models of owls and hawks, spinners, windsocks, etc.) can be used, although these devices have inconsistent success.
- Tactile deterrents are sometimes used with marginal success. However, some products can get on feathers and impair the bird's ability to fly and stay warm.
- Sound deterrents coupled with motion detection are another option. Typically this would involve playing the recording of a woodpecker distress call followed by a raptor call.
- Tying a burlap bag or other heavy fabric around a tree (particularly ornamental trees) can be effective at preventing sapsucker damage.

Application for a depredation permit for some species of woodpeckers may be an option, but should be considered as a last resort. Proper exclusion, harassment, and monitoring will be necessary to demonstrate that need. Permits will be issued only if non-lethal methods have previously been tried and failed. The applicant must show strong justification (i.e. where significant structural damage has resulted in an economic hardship).

For further information about woodpeckers, please contact: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Pacific Southwest Region Division of Migratory Birds and Habitat at 916/978-9183 or permitsR8MB@fws.gov.