How About Those Woodpeckers!?

By Lynn Stafford, with Liz and Bill Buchroeder, Terre Ashmore

(Photo credits at bottom of story)

This month's and next month's nature articles will focus on local birds that use tree wood in their lifestyles. Here, in and near Pine Mountain Club, are many trees and several species of woodpeckers. We know that many birds and other animals use tree branches as support for nests. And many birds forage on insects and other small invertebrates within tree foliage. But, what about the wood itself? Most of the wood in a living tree is dead. The bark is a thin layer on the outside of the inner dead trunk. Only the inner part of the bark is alive and allows transport of food, water and minerals. The inner dead wood, the main part of the trunk, serves as support for the tree. And the outer bark, also dead, serves as protection.

Fig. 1: Valley oak snag (TA)

Woodpeckers have discovered the value of tree wood to a remarkable extent. Through millions of years of evolution, they have become adapted to lives centered on trees. Woodpeckers have very strong bills to drill into wood. They have special anatomical adaptations to protect the brain from all the pounding. Most woodpeckers have a special alignment of toes, so that two are in front and two are behind. This way, they can walk up vertical trunks. Stiff tails help to support the bodies. Woodpeckers drill into tree trunks to build nesting cavities within the inner dead wood. Many woodpeckers use drumming on hollow areas in wood to communicate with each other. Nesting and foraging often occur in dead trees or dead branches of trees, where the wood is softer, and more insects are present. Therefore, it is true that dead wood in a forest, whether it be a dead standing snag (Fig. 1), dead branches or logs on the forest floor, is an essential part of the forest ecosystem.

Fig. 2: Acorn woodpecker (RC)

There are 22 woodpecker species in North America. Nine species find suitable habitat in our local mountains. One of the easiest species to be aware of is the acorn woodpecker (Fig. 2). It is noisy, bright-colored, lives in boisterous colonies, and often gets into trouble with human residents. As its name implies, it is found around oak trees. It eats acorns and tree sap (pine), as well as insects. It is an unusual woodpecker in that it is highly colonial. These birds are always found in tight family groups. These groups maintain well-guarded territories that often last for generations. Tasks are divided up between individuals. Some are breeding pairs; some specialize in childcare; some obtain food; some create

larders of cached acorns (Fig. 3); and some guard the stored food. In other words, these woodpeckers do not exist as individuals. Each bird is part of a tight community. Throughout one bird's lifetime, it will

probably pass through several roles in the functioning of the colony. Acorn woodpeckers get into conflict with us forest-dwelling humans because of their habit of stashing acorns in drilled holes in the wood of trees. Often, they try to use our buildings. There are several ways to discourage them from turning one's house into "Swiss cheese." I have found plastic netting to be of some use. Just remember, the birds were here before us modern humans. We need to be a little tolerant.

Another oak-loving woodpecker is the Nuttall's woodpecker. It is common in oak/pinyon woodlands but has a very different lifestyle than the acorn

Fig. 3: Acorn woodpecker protecting its larder (DS)

woodpecker. These small black-and-white birds are found singly or in pairs. They move deftly along the trunks of trees and on all sides of spreading branches, searching for insects. They can be identified by the ladder-like pattern of white dots on their backs (Fig. 4). The males have small red head patches (Fig. 5). Their nesting holes are small because of their size.

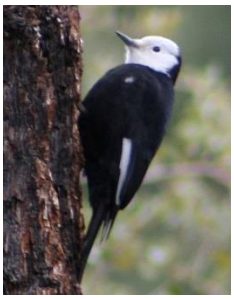
Fig. 4: Female Nuttall's woodpecker (BB)

Three other fairly small forest-dwellers are the downy, hairy and white-headed woodpeckers. Like other woodpeckers, they create nesting cavities in trees with their strong bills. Downies are more common in riparian (streamside) woodlands. The hairy and white-headed prefer pines and fir forests. The downy and hairy look very much alike, each with a white stripe down the back (Fig. 6). The white-headed is very conspicuous, if it lets you see it (Fig. 7). It likes to perch on the side of the trunk away from the viewer. It is particularly common in the highest parts of our mountains.

Fig. 5: Male Nuttall's woodpecker (BA)

A popular, and rather different, woodpecker is the northern flicker. This is the largest woodpecker in our local mountains. It is brownish in color (Fig. 8) with bright orange wings in flight (Fig. 9). This bird provides nesting sites for larger bird species who frequent abandoned woodpecker holes. Flickers are unusual in the

Fig. 6: Downy woodpecker ((KP)



fact that they like to feed on the ground, as well as in trees. They particularly like ant larva, which they scoop out of holes in soil with their long, sticky tongues.

There is a group of woodpeckers called the sapsuckers. Our common species is the red-breasted sapsucker (Fig. 10). This is the bird that drills parallel series of small holes in trees (Fig. 11). These holes are found in many local fruit trees in our gardens. They eat both the sap and the insects that are attracted to the sap in the

Fig. 7: White-headed woodpecker (KP)

holes they produce. High in our mountains is the rarely seen Williamson's sapsucker (Fig. 12).

Woodpeckers, like many birds, tend to wander at times. There is a very attractive woodpecker of open woodlands in the Intermountain West that occasionally visits our area. This is the Lewis's woodpecker, discovered by the Lewis and Clark expedition. It was certainly known to the indigenous nations long before. This woodpecker is quite dark with glossy green, red and white patches (Fig. 13).

Fig. 8: Northern flicker fluffed out in cold weather (CN)

The next article will focus on birds that prefer to nest in cavities and have become dependent on abandoned woodpecker holes. These are some of the many animals that depend on the dead wood in our forests.

Fig. 9 (left): Northern flicker showing orange wing patches (MM)

Fig. 10: Red-breasted sapsucker (MM) ***Fig. 11: Apple tree with lines of sapsucker holes (LS***

Fig. 12: Williamson's sapsucker (PS) ***Fig. 13: Lewis's woodpecker (CN)***

Photographers: Bill Arbanas (BA), Terre Ashmore (TA), Bill Buchroeder (BB), Randy Cushman (RC), Mary McDevitt (MM), Charles Noble (CN), Katy Penland (KP), David Schindler (DS), Patty Shoupe (PS), Lynn Stafford (LS)