

NATURE NOW

Woodpeckers Do Far More Good than Harm

By LYDIA KING FREHSE
Special Writer for The Birmingham Eccentric

Already the earth's slow turning is moving all things toward the sun and the days lengthen imperceptibly. Now while we are having our morning coffee, it is light enough to see the downy woodpecker eating his breakfast, pecking away at the suet nailed to trunk of one of our tall oaks. Frequently he makes several return visits during the day. Sometimes he is joined by the nuthatch or the brown creeper.

The downy woodpecker is the smallest and friendliest of his family. Bird watchers look upon him as a miniature edition of his cousin the hairy woodpecker. Other field marks are his shorter beak and his black tail bars.

Both species have the familiar black and white pattern with the red spot on the back of the head appearing on the male.

These two are the only "white-backed" members of the woodpecker tribe. Both are named for the short, almost woolly feathers which conceal their nostrils. This is a protection against frost which is found in many birds which winter in the north.

ALL EARTH'S creatures are molded for survival and the body structure of the woodpecker betrays his habits and manner.

Every morning we see him climbing and supporting himself on the tree trunk like an expert lineman. His legs are short and stout. His strong feet are fitted with sharp-clawed toes, two of which are directed forward and two backward for extra balance and agility. His short tail is tipped with spines and acts as a brace. So that it may remain useful at all times, the central pair of feathers molts last and only after the others have been replaced. Thus equipped for climbing, the downy is in a position to search for his food supply of wood-boring ants, weevils and caterpillars.

After he has eaten his fill of

most showy species, the ivory billed, has been all but exterminated and the pileated has often been persecuted.

THE SAPSUCKERS are the only branch of this family which might deserve this reputation. However, even their sap-sucking habits seldom cause serious damage.

The holes which woodpeckers make to get their food are shallow, soon heal over and do no permanent harm. Their nesting holes are usually made in trunks or branches that are already dead.

On the other hand their insect-eating habits are invaluable in preserving trees. They have no equal as enemies of spruce-bark beetles and sap-wood borers.

A special study of the downy nut on a day in March showed that between 9:40 a.m. and 12:15 p.m. a single bird climbed over and inspected 151 woodland trees in the meantime making 20 excavations for food.

Most of these were exposed galleries of wood-boring ants which so damage a tree trunk that it finally falls to earth when hit by a storm.

THE FAMILIAR drumming sound of the woodpecker is not a song but a rolling beat produced by striking the bill rapidly against a dry resonant limb.

We vacationed last summer on Wallon lake with a colony of pileated woodpeckers who sounded like riveting machines. This drumming is used both as a warning to trespassers and as a mating call. What vocal notes they do employ are loud and unmelodious.

Both the hairy and the downy are winter residents in our locality, but the former is more likely to remain in the woods.

The red-head, who is the handsome of the woodpecker family, migrates irregularly depending on his food supply. He may remain north for the winter in seasons

These SPECIAL tools are also used in nest-making. The downy excavates a hole about one and a quarter inches in diameter and eight to twelve inches deep in a dead stub or branch of a live tree. Here the female lays four or five white eggs in a chip-lined nest.

There is great safety in this procedure and since there is no need to wait for favorable nesting weather the brooding period can begin in late April or early May.

Nature, ever economical of materials and methods, does not bother to color or dapple the eggs which are already well-hidden and protected from their enemies in the dark recess of the nest.

In the past the woodpeckers have enjoyed a dubious reputation because of their habit of drilling into trees for their food and many have been unjustly slain. Of the two

ENGAGEMENT of Gloria Jean McCallin to Lewis Scott Garling of Montpelier, O., is announced by her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Donald E. Tomkins of Cranbrook, Bloomfield Hills. Lewis is the son of Mr. Scott E. Garling of Fayette, O., and the late Mr. Garling.

when there is a good crop of beech nuts which he relishes.

THE FLICKER is driven southward by his preference for ground-burrowing ants. However, he returns early and each year I await his cheerful call as a sure harbinger of spring.

The fine balance of nature which birds help to maintain is of prime importance in preserving our forests, farms, orchards and gardens.

Your columnist agrees with the ornithologist who recently remarked, "The birds can get along without us, but we cannot get along without them."



Military Student Wins BHT Award

Cadet Ethan W. Golden has passed his special tests for excellence in the Cavalry unit at Culver Military Academy, Culver, Ind., and is entitled to the BHT award which signifies full membership in the well known Black Horse Troop. It is one of the highest military

honors that a new cadet can win in the famous Troop. Until a cadet has passed his special tests dealing with all phases of cavalry instruction, and fundamental knowledge of horsemanship, he is not considered to be a full-fledged member of the Troop.

In addition to the cavalry subjects, the candidate for the BHT award must maintain satisfactory grades in academic subjects, demonstrate his knowledge of certain phases of Infantry drill, and must pass an automobile safety test. Cadet Golden is the grandson of Mr. and Mrs. Abner A. Weir, 4540 Walnut Lake road, Bloomfield Township.

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If wishes were dogwood... spring would be here!

Pardon us for taking liberties with an old saying but, we are merely voicing a widespread desire to see winter gone and spring about us. Possibly this delightful season holds the added anticipation of wedding plans for you or someone close. We offer this suggestion to tide you over the intervening period. If you have not already chosen your sterling pattern or need additional pieces, make a leisurely choice from our superb selection. Register your name or the one who is getting married in our bridal registry so that others can know the pattern. Besides actively bringing that date closer, you will derive a great deal of pleasure in selecting from the patterns offered by these greatest silverhouses.

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