

How Much Wood Would a Woodpecker Peck?

By Kayla Pringle

Anytime I am walking in the forest, birding, or going on a hike, there are certain birds I'm on the lookout for. I would like to say that I get excited to see any and all birds while I'm out in nature, but we all know there are certain animals that we want to see more than others. Woodpeckers are those birds for me. Fortunately, Texas is home to many native woodpeckers.

Woodpeckers have strong bills that allow them to drum trees, forage for insects, and create nest cavities. During the spring, woodpeckers will excavate a hole in a tree to create a cavity that they will use for one breeding season. As with many birds, their nests will be abandoned at the end of breeding season, and the remnants of the nest will decompose. For woodpeckers, once they flee their nests, these cavities are used by many different animals in the ecosystem.

Birds such as owls, swifts, swallows, wrens, and more will use these cavities to protect their own nests in future breeding seasons. Other small mammals like squirrels, chipmunks, and even bats will also use these cavities for shelter.

Many woodpecker species have healthy population levels, but all are still threatened by habitat loss and pesticide use. We have likely lost the Ivory-billed Woodpecker that hasn't been seen since 2004 in Arkansas. Additionally, the Imperial Woodpecker, which was native to Mexico, hasn't been seen since the 1950s.

Lewis's Woodpecker and the Red-cockaded Woodpecker are species that have declined rapidly and are now under intense conservation efforts to boost their populations. Both of these species live in open coniferous forests or old growth forests that rely on fire, but the suppression of fires has caused their natural habitats to disappear. Conservationists have started to produce controlled fires to mimic the natural fires that maintained these habitats originally.

When you're out hiking or walking trails in a park or nature center, you might notice dead trees that have been left on the ground or in the forest. Some may think this makes the park look unkept, but there is an important reason these dead trees are left in the forest. Many of trees have cavities from woodpeckers or serve as habitat for wildlife. Animals will continue to use these dead trees with cavities as their home or for shelter.

Woodpeckers will drum on dead trees as well, searching for insects to eat. Dead trees can take up to 100 years to decompose, so keeping these trees around and conserving woodpeckers are critical for wildlife and biodiversity! A tip for you: If you have dead trees or snags that aren't a hazard for you or your neighbors, you might consider leaving it on the ground because it is likely to attract wildlife! Thank you for reading and keep your eyes and ears open!



Photo by Mike Williams

Caption: A Downy Woodpecker examining a tree.