

Red-headed Woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*)

Description: Red-headed Woodpeckers are medium-sized woodpeckers with fairly large, rounded red heads, short, stiff tails, and powerful, spike-like bills. Their back is black with white wing patches. The belly is white and not streaked. Male and females look alike.

Trend: Steep Decline - Conservation Tipping Point Yellow Alert

Habitat: Red-headed Woodpeckers live in pine savannahs, bottomland forest, and other open forests with clear understories. Open pine plantations, treerows in agricultural areas, and standing timber in beaver swamps and other wetlands all attract Red-headed Woodpeckers.

Unfortunately, development is encroaching on these types of forests locally. Although these birds are not threatened across their range, they are thought to be declining locally, as they are sensitive to disturbance. Wherever they breed, dead (or partially dead) trees for nest cavities are an important part of their habitat. They are somewhat nomadic; in a given location they can be common one year and absent the next.

Red-headed Woodpeckers eat insects, fruits, and seeds. Overall, they eat about one-third animal material (mostly insects) and two-thirds plant material. Their insect diet includes beetles, cicadas, midges, honeybees, and grasshoppers. They are one of the most skillful flycatchers among the North American woodpeckers. They forage on the ground and up to 30 feet above the forest floor in summer, whereas in the colder months they forage higher in the trees. In winter Red-headed Woodpeckers catch insects on warm days, but they mostly eat nuts such as acorns, beech nuts, and pecans. Red-headed Woodpeckers cache food by wedging it into crevices in trees or under shingles on houses. Although they readily excavate nests in utility poles, a study found that eggs did not hatch and young did not fledge when the birds nested in newer poles (3–4 years old), possibly because of the creosote used to preserve them. In the middle twentieth century, Red-headed Woodpeckers were quite commonly hit by cars as the birds foraged for aerial insects along roadsides.

Ways You can help with Conservation: Red-headed Woodpeckers declined by over 1% per year from 1966 to 2019, resulting in a cumulative decline of 54%, according to the North American Breeding Bird Survey. Declines are likely due to habitat loss, declining availability of dead trees in

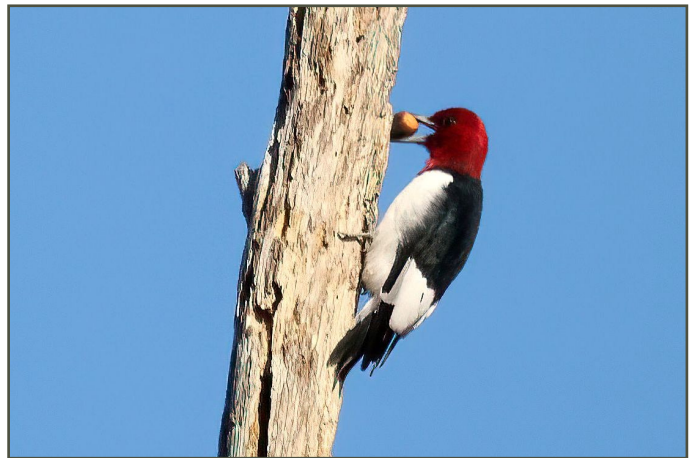


Photo by Alice Le Duc



Photo by Barbara Driscoll

their open-forest habitat, and competition with non-native European starlings over nest sites.

Leave dead trees and snags in lowland areas. NHBA advocates for leaving dead trees and snags in areas that don't present a danger to structures or people. Dead trees are often more alive than live ones because of the many insects, birds and other wildlife that use them. You can also cut larger trees about 20-40 feet above the ground which allows for woodpeckers and other birds to continue to use the trees.

Eliminating pesticide use including mosquito spraying helps insects and birds.