

February 2008: Meditations on Woodpeckers

A sound of winter: on a hemlock-covered bluff on the Knowlton-Swanson-Stephenson Preserve in Belfast, a tapping noise, growing louder. Not rigid tree trunks creaking under the weight of cold; not the clacking of frozen branches in the slight breeze; not the shifting of bits of ice in the fast stream below--a repetitive knocking, followed by the soft sound of bark chips falling onto crusty snow. I follow my ears to a dead tree, almost bare of bark, fretted with woodpecker holes. And there he is above me, red crest bright--a pileated woodpecker, hammering away. Later in my walk, I hear his loud "ka-ka-ka-ka" call resounding unbuffered through the leafless woods. These are his woods, and he wants all within earshot to know it.

Here in Maine we have the opportunity to see nine woodpecker species at best, and of those, only five are common: northern flicker, yellow-bellied sapsucker, and downy, hairy, and pileated woodpeckers. The ivory-billed woodpecker, now well-known to the general public for having gone extinct and then possibly having been rediscovered in the cypress swamps of the south, never lived anywhere near New England. Instead we have the pileated, a smaller but still impressive and handsome substitute that used to be known as the "cock of the woods" or the "log-cock."

The pileated woodpecker looks a bit like Woody Woodpecker, the old cartoon character with the contagious laugh (which my mother, by the way, if she's in the right mood, can imitate perfectly). The word "pileated" refers, in fact, to its crested head, Woody's most notable physical feature. The pileated doesn't sound quite like Woody or my mother; its distinctive, rather primeval, call always make me think of background bird noises in movie jungle scenes.

There's an oft-repeated story about the ivory-billed woodpecker, in which the famous 18th-century ornithologist Alexander Wilson injured one (in an attempt to "collect" it for science) and brought it to his room at an inn. While he was briefly away from the room, the bird almost made its escape by pecking through the plaster-and-lathe wall. Unfortunately, it was caught before it had quite pecked through, refused to eat in captivity, and thus soon died. The pathos of that story, how the bird almost escaped, makes one overlook the fact that the woodpecker pecked through a house wall in less than an hour! That's one strong bill, and one strong will to escape.

The pileated woodpecker also boasts a history of serious pecking strength. In C.E. Bendire's "Life Histories of North American Birds" (1895), as quoted in Ralph Palmer's "Maine Birds," an observer describes: "I have seen one pick a large hole through two inches of frozen green hemlock to get at the hollow interior, and it seemed impossible that a steel tool of the same size could have done such work without being broken." In the woods, its large, square-edged holes are distinctive and easily visible along many local trails. This time of year, the bird spends nights in roosting holes, but in spring it will move with a mate into a nesting hole, often using the same one for several years. My parents see what I bet is the same pair every year, nesting in an oak tree near their house on the Megunticook River.



Pileated Woodpecker excavations, Ducktrap River Preserve

I distinctly remember when I first saw one, aged 12, on a trip to climb Mt. Katahdin. The night before our hike, we camped along the West Branch of the

Penobscot River. The next morning, I was awakened in my tent by a loud knocking nearby. I crept out into the chilly, dewy June morning feeling like I'd been summoned forth from my sleep by woodpecker drums. It took me about 15 minutes of sneaking around under trees, without binoculars, to find my first pileated woodpecker. The thrill of being in the dramatic presence of that "cool," sought-after bird, combined with the excitement of our impending hike up Mt. Katahdin, has firmly fixed that morning in my memory.

Many ornithologists now believe that the alleged ivory-billed woodpecker caught on videotape was really a pileated, a very common species in that habitat, as well. From a land conservation perspective, however, what species it was doesn't really matter. The sighting enabled The Nature Conservancy and other partners to quickly conserve thousands of acres of Mississippi delta bottomland, a rich habitat supporting many kinds of wildlife. Those conservation efforts are not wasted just because they may not actually be protecting the rare woodpecker, because the charismatic pileated woodpecker--indeed, dozens of waterfowl and songbird species, as well as other animals--will benefit from the protection of their sensitive and rare cypress swamp habitat.

Here in the Camden area it has been my sense that pileated woodpeckers are becoming more common. I often see one flying near the Land Trust office or my house nearby, its rowing wing beats and big white wing patches against its black body distinctive, along with that crazy call. I wonder if I'm seeing the same pair of birds that nest near my parents' house just upriver, because the bird ranges up to five miles from its nesting hole. It relies on relatively mature forests, so the protection of large blocks of forested habitat, like with Camden Hills State Park (which is almost in my backyard) and Coastal Mountains Land Trust's system of preserves throughout the western Penobscot Bay region, will ensure that this trend continues and we'll continue to hear the pileated woodpecker's call ringing out in our backyards and woods.



Pileated Woodpecker excavating a rotten stump near the Land Trust office last summer.

Edward Howe Forbush's "Birds of Massachusetts," which was "Issued by the Authority of the Legislature" in 1927--a pre-ecology time when a species' value to humans was more important than its intrinsic value as a part of the web of life--states, with some subtle affection: "ECONOMIC STATUS: The Northern Pileatead Woodpecker takes its food chiefly from the forest and does no injury to the farmer or the horticulturist. It sometimes bores holes into trees, apparently sound, but such trees are infested by borers or ants, and the work of the woodpecker in such a case often saves the tree from complete destruction. Its abandoned domiciles serve as nesting places for the Wood Duck, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, and possibly for the Golden-eye also. Therefore it plays a part in the conservation of these game-birds. The bird is useful and picturesque and an asset to any forested region. It should be protected everywhere by law and public sentiment."

I'm very fond of this image of the pileated woodpecker as unconscious conservationist; and if indeed it was a pileated woodpecker and not an ivory-bill seen in that Arkansas swamp a few years ago, then the species continues to play the role of conservationist at an even higher level than ever!

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