

Backyard Briefs

A weekly column

by Judy Jessop, Nature Conservancy Volunteer

In the quiet of the winter woods you can easily hear it—the tap-tap-tap of bill on wood as woodpeckers excavate for pesky insects. These birds spend much of their waking hours chiseling into insect-infested wood or teasing bugs and larvae from deep crevices in the bark of trees. There are eight different types of woodpeckers that live in our region of the state: the downy, red-cockaded, hairy, red-bellied, red-headed and pileated woodpeckers, yellow-bellied sapsuckers, and northern flickers. The most rare of our woodpeckers is the red-cockaded, which was placed on the endangered species list in 1970. Red-cockaded woodpeckers are still found in mature, southern, pine forests (with trees 60 to 100+ years) wherever the understory is open and park-like. The Roanoke River region harbors such habitat and is therefore a haven for these birds.

Identifying the red-cockaded in the forest however, is not easy because they are very similar, in both size and coloration, to downy and hairy woodpeckers. All three are black and white and males have a little accent of red on their heads (downy are 6 ½, red-cockaded 8 ½ and hairy 9 ½ inches in length). Unlike other woodpeckers however, red-cockaded build their nesting cavities in live trees. The entrance hole, about two inches in diameter is surrounded by sticky sap. The birds continually keep open the flow of sap all the way around the entrance hole, which is effective in discouraging obnoxious predators, especially tree climbing snakes. Over the years the build-up of oozing sap takes on a whitish appearance and this can be easily spotted from the ground.

Red-cockaded woodpeckers also have an advanced social system. They live in groups, called clans, that range up to nine birds. A clan consists of one breeding pair and single adults that are often sons of the breeding male. The single birds excavate roosting cavities close to the nesting cavity. During nesting season the clan members assist with incubating the eggs and feeding nestlings. Once the fledglings leave the nest the clan continues to feed the young birds, though less often as time progresses.

Such team work gives the young birds a very supportive first summer while our forests are relieved of many pests. No matter which type of woodpecker is at work, the tap-tap-tap you hear is relieving us of wood-boring insects, beetle larvae, centipedes, millipedes, spiders, roaches and many other harmful insects.