

Red Headed Woodpecker Recovery Project

The Red-headed woodpecker (RHWO) is a strikingly colored bird of the Midwest. Sadly, its numbers have dropped by over 60% in the past 50 years, mostly due to the destruction of oak savanna by suburban housing and intensive agriculture. Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery was formed in 2007. Our goal is to reverse the decline and encourage the recovery of this bird through the creation, preservation, and restoration of habitat. We accomplish this through research and public education, and by working with state parks, national wildlife refuges, and private landowners, and encouraging them to develop new and to improve present savanna habitat.



Red-headed Woodpecker



Red-bellied Woodpecker

Red-headed woodpeckers are feisty vocal birds during the early breeding season. Males and females are identical with striking red, black, and white color patterns. This clearly separates them from the 'poorly-named' red-bellied woodpecker shown above. In central Minnesota red-headed woodpeckers are generally habitat specialists that prefer an oak savanna-type landscape. Savanna is characterized by a large open, prairie-like understory with scattered clusters of trees, primarily oaks, whose thick bark tolerates fire. An open understory facilitates the bird's habit of swooping down from a perch to capture grasshoppers, dragonflies, and other insects during spring and summer months.

Periodic fire is important because it reduces the spread of shrubs in which insects find safe haven. Another significant ingredient of red-headed woodpecker habitat is the presence of large dead trees, or 'snags', with limbs large enough to accommodate cavities for nesting, roosting, and food-caching activities. We have been surprised by finding nest cavities in limbs only 10 inches in diameter. The cavities are so narrow that once young birds hatch and grow to juvenile size, they actually have to 'stack' on top of each other to secure food and space. This may explain why with a normal clutch size of 4-5 eggs only 2 or 3 birds succeed in fledging.



Through a joint seven-year research project with the University of Minnesota's Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve and the Minnesota DNR we have learned that Red Headed Woodpeckers:

Are cavity nesters with an average cavity height of a little over 26 feet (based on 200 nests studied).



Generally lay 4-5 eggs, of which only 2 or 3 successfully fledge.



Have an average hatching time of 12 to 14 days. The young generally fledge in another 26 days.



Are tolerable of human presence and will come to feeders with suet and sunflower seeds. Sometimes they even follow our researchers looking for a handout.

Eat a wide variety of insects, berries and grubs spring and summer, and acorns in the fall and winter.



What you can do to help

Report concentrations of two or more nesting pairs of RHWO through our website at redheadrecovery.org and encourage habitat restoration and creation in your community.

Visit the Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve (CCESR) in East Bethel. While this is private University of Minnesota land, there is a nature trail open to the public with nesting RHWOs present.

Join **Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery** and contribute to our research and public education. \$20 yearly membership. Mail to: RhWR, P.O. Box 3801, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 55403-0801