



**“The Ultimate Drilling Machines” –
The Woodpeckers of the Eastern Lake Ontario
Dune and Wetlands Area**

By Eastern Lake Ontario Dune Steward Elizabeth Wolff

Eastern Lake Ontario Dune Stewards monitor and promote responsible recreational usage at sites along the nearly 17-mile stretch of the Eastern Lake Ontario Dune and Wetlands Area (ELOWDA). One way that the stewards encourage responsible-use of the resource areas is by educating the public about the animals – birds and wildlife - that live within this unique habitat.

The inland wetland habitat, filled with mature deciduous forests, is home to hundreds of bird species including several varieties of woodpeckers.

Woodpeckers are well adapted to a lifestyle that involves drilling into trees. The sound of a woodpecker drilling for food usually produces less sound than when a woodpecker is “drumming” against a tree to communicate with a mate.

Most species bore into decaying wood in search of insects, which comprise about 50% of their diets. To catch carpenter ants and other bugs, a quick flick of the tongue is all that’s needed. The woodpecker’s extra long tongue captures its prey and draws it into the mouth in the blink of an eye.

Woodpeckers also create cavities for resting or laying their eggs. These cavities can be used as shelters for birds and animals, such as sparrows, small owls, and squirrels, once they are no longer in use by the woodpecker.

Inside a nesting cavity, woodpeckers line the bottom with wood chips. In a roosting nest for sleeping, some woodpeckers, e.g., the pileated woodpecker, will create multiple exits to escape a predator.



Due to the woodpeckers’ home-building role within the animal community, they are often considered indicators of a healthy ecosystem. Their homes attract a diverse array of secondary cavity-dwelling birds and small mammals.

The rich ecosystem of the ELOWDA is an ideal place to watch woodpeckers interact in their natural habitat.

Pileated woodpecker illustration by Robert McNamara, Art of Wilderness; reprinted with permission from the Birding the Great Lakes Seaway Trail field guide. The ELOWDA is accessed by driving along the Great Lakes Seaway Trail that is one of America’s Byways and a National Recreation Trail.

An Introduction to ELODWA's Woodpeckers

The most commonly seen woodpeckers of the ELODWA (Eastern Lake Ontario Dune and Wetlands Area) are the downy woodpecker, hairy woodpecker, northern flicker, pileated woodpecker, red-bellied woodpecker, and the yellow-bellied sap sucker.

What Adaptations Make Woodpeckers "Drilling Machines?"

- A spongy skull interior acts as a pillow to absorb the impact of the bird's small brain as it is jostled
- The woodpecker's beak continuously grows so it never wears down
- When boring holes, the woodpecker is protected from flying debris by feathers that cover the nose, acting as filters, and transparent lenses, called nictitating membranes, that close over the eyes
- Stiff tail feathers give the woodpecker the support it needs during quick pecking
- Zygodactyls (feet with two toes facing forward and two toes facing back) allow woodpeckers to cling to the sides of trees



This tree shows the work of a woodpecker. Photo: Elizabeth Wolff, Eastern Lake Ontario Dune and Salmon River Steward Program

Other Woodpecker Facts

- Red-bellied woodpeckers often create a new nesting cavity below the one from the previous year
- Yellow-bellied sap suckers drill into trees and allow the sap to drain. Sap attracts and traps insects that the woodpecker will later come back to eat
- Hairy woodpeckers have been known to appear in large numbers in areas where there are outbreaks of bark beetles. Hairy woodpeckers feed on the destructive beetles and help to lower their population
- If you look closely, all three of these species of woodpeckers can be seen at ELODWA's public access sites

For More Info: Eastern Lake Ontario Dune & Salmon River Steward Program, 315-312-3042

The Eastern Lake Ontario Dune Steward & Salmon River Steward Program is managed by New York Sea Grant in partnership with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, New York State Parks, and The Nature Conservancy



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