

Songbirds

of Missouri

Red-bellied woodpecker



Red-bellied woodpeckers belong to the bird family Picidae. This group, which includes all the woodpeckers, includes 210 species worldwide.

It's puzzling to some people how the red-bellied woodpecker got its name, but it's easy to see why this bird and its cousins are valuable to area forests.

The most eye-catching characteristic of the red-bellied woodpecker isn't a red belly – it's the bird's bright red head! But this bird gets its name from a less noticeable reddish tinge on its predominantly white breast. The combination of its red head and black-and-white barred back makes the red-bellied woodpecker one of the most conspicuous woodpeckers in Missouri.

Lesser-known, but equally important, are the benefits red-bellied woodpeckers and other woodpeckers provide to the natural world. Woodpeckers help keep local forests healthy by consuming a variety of insects – many of which are potentially harmful to trees. In one study, a woodpecker consumed 13,500 insect larvae in a year.

Woodpeckers use pecking as a method of communication, but the best-known use for this behavior is finding food. By

pecking, these birds locate grubs and other insects. When woodpeckers locate an insect, they use their heavy chisel-shaped bills to retrieve it.

When the insect is revealed, woodpeckers spear it with their tongues. Woodpeckers have long tongues that wrap over the top of their skulls (underneath their skin) and attach in their nostrils. The bristle at the tongue's tip helps the bird spear the insects.

Depending on the time of year, Missouri is home to seven species of woodpeckers. Woodpeckers are best known for pecking on trees, but it's common during winter to see them eating at some bird feeders, too. In summer, fruits and nuts comprise much of a woodpecker's diet. Tree sap is also a food source for another well-known Missouri woodpecker – the yellow-bellied sapsucker.

Red-bellied woodpeckers, like most of their relatives, are birds of the forest. Courtship and breeding begins in April and lasts until early June. Woodpeckers will nest in a pre-existing hole in a tree-trunk, or if necessary, the male and female will team up to create a new nesting cavity. The female lays from three to eight eggs, and both parents take turns incubating them for 12 to 14 days. The male does most of the incubation during the night. After hatching, the young stay in the nest cavity for approximately a month. Both adults care for the young while they are in the nest.

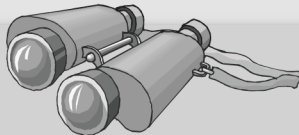
While many people love to see and hear woodpeckers, these birds can be a minor nuisance. It's not uncommon for them to peck on the cedar siding of a home, and redwood and pine siding seem equally attractive to these creatures. Sometimes, woodpeckers drum on the loose metal of houses such as the gutters and stovepipes. To the bird, this is an extra-loud way of establishing its territory. To humans, it's simply annoying.

Because they are protected under the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act, woodpeckers cannot be trapped or shot. However, homeowners have several non-lethal options for ridding themselves of woodpecker problems. Mylar tape and "scare-eye" balloons have proven to be effective woodpecker repellants. In some instances, a homeowner may be able to keep woodpeckers away by creating a physical barrier with small-mesh bird netting.

More information about woodpeckers can be found in the Missouri Department of Conservation pamphlet "Missouri Woodpeckers."

(Missouri Show-Me Standards: S.3, S.4)

Learn More:
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www.mo-nie.com
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Be a Bird Watcher!

Look...

Red-bellied woodpeckers are year-round residents of Missouri and have a preference for forests, swamps or wooded urban habitats. These birds are particularly conspicuous in winter when they can easily be spotted in foliage-free forests searching for insects and insect larvae underneath tree bark.

...and Listen

Red-bellied woodpeckers make several calls. They sometimes make a harsh "quirrrr" sound that rises slightly at the end. In flight, they might make a low-sounding "chug." They also can deliver a "chig-chig" or a series of "chig" sounds either slowly or in a rapid pattern.