



Brunswick Wildlife Pileated (“Don’t Call Me Woody”) Woodpecker

The Pileated Woodpecker, the southeast’s largest woodpecker, is a resident of mature coniferous and deciduous forests. Its range extends from east Texas to Maine, to portions of the mid-west that are not substantially deforested, across southern Canada, and down the west coast to central California.

The famous and long-thought-to-be-extinct Ivory-billed Woodpecker was significantly larger; however, it was much more of a habitat specialist than the Pileated and preferred large expanses of old-growth, bottomland hardwoods...habitats that practically no longer exist. The jury is still out on recent reports of Ivory-billed discoveries and further searches are being conducted in Arkansas, Florida, and South Carolina in the remnants of their preferred habitat. Hopefully, they will be found.

The Pileated is not currently listed as threatened or endangered, only protected from hunting. Its numbers declined steeply during the 19th century and first decades of the 20th century with the deforestation of the east due to logging and clearing of forest for agriculture. Removal of large live and dead trees and fallen trees and limbs had a very negative impact on this species plus it is highly sensitive to forest fragmentation, requiring forested tracts of 250 acres or more for territories.

Since then the total population of Pileateds has stabilized and experienced a steady increase. Declines in intensive agriculture in the northeast led to many abandoned farms being gradually reforested, bringing back Pileateds. USGS Breeding Bird Surveys for 1966–2005 report a very significant increase of 1.7 percent per year.

The Pileated is a crow-sized woodpecker with a large wingspan, red crest, black and white facial stripes, yellow eyes, black body, and white on its wings. As you can tell from the pictures, it would be almost impossible to misidentify this spectacular species. If the sun was in your eyes, with the aid of enough malt beverages, you might call it a crow.

There are a few gender differences. The male (pictured in the head photo) has a red crown and forehead while a female has a grayish forehead. Unlike the female, the male has a red moustachial stripe. Juveniles have shorter crests and brown eyes.

The Pileated is known for its territorial call and drumming. Its call is a loud, rapid series of “kuk, kuk, kuk...” that rise and fall in pitch.

The Pileated uses loud, very distinctive drumming of its bill on hollow limbs to designate its territory. It begins with a slow drum roll with the tempo becoming more rapid near the end. They drum through out the year but most frequently during early spring as breeding activities begin. While both sexes drum, males drum more frequently than females.

Last March, I took a class to Boiling Spring Lakes targeting woodpeckers. The students got a great Pileated lesson...we heard its call, then its drumming, and then we saw the bird. As a bonus, we heard the drumming of another Pileated in the distance answering the first one. It is a rare experience for these behaviors to be observed so close together. The students will never appreciate the role serendipity played in that little adventure!

A Pileated pair stays together on territory all year and they are monogamous. A new nest cavity is excavated each spring, usually in a dead tree. Both the male and female excavate the new nest. Its cavity is not lined except for wood chips and, unlike excavations for food, nest cavities are round.

Its strong chisel-shaped bill enables excavations for nest and roost cavities and for finding prey. Their bill, seen from the side, is awesome but that does not show the broad width at its base. The chips literally fly! The yellow bristled feathers over its nostrils shield them from flying wood chips.

Because of its role in the forest ecosystem, the Pileated is a keystone species. Its abandoned excavations are used by many species of birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and insects for shelter and breeding. It helps other birds find food because they are attracted to the loud chiseling.

A Pileated's diet consists of carpenter ants and beetle larvae which are extracted from standing live and dead trees plus fallen logs and limbs. Their pounding reveals hollow portions of trees and may disturb insects and force them to the surface. It makes large rectangular excavations or scales bark off trees to find ants colonies. Pileateds also eat other insects and larvae such as caterpillars, cockroaches, and grasshoppers plus berries, seed, and nuts are added when available.

The Pileated's long tongue, with backward-projecting barbs and sticky saliva is perfectly designed to extract prey. Its tongue is extended from a sheathed structure running from its right nostril around the top of the skull and through its mouth. The tongue is capable of extending several inches beyond the tip of the bill to nab ants and larvae from deep holes.

Be on the lookout for these woodpeckers because they frequently forage on mature trees in towns or suburban neighborhoods. They are large enough to easily spot and fun to watch. You have to see the pounding and chips flying to fully appreciate the strength of their bills.

John Ennis



For additional information, photos, and range maps, go to:

http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Pileated_Woodpecker_dtl.html

and <http://www.nhptv.org/NatureWorks/pileatedwoodpecker.htm>.

The Cornell All About Birds website is a good source of information for any species:

<http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/>.