

Pileated Woodpecker Nesting

Pileateds play percussion

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Knock-knock-knock-knock-knock-knock-knock-knock! I'm standing in Whistler's campground in Jasper National Park, Canada gazing up at the campground's namesake mountain when a sharp, rapid knocking sound disturbs the warming April air. Knock-knock-knock-knock-knock-knock-knock-knock! I turn around and peer in the direction of the noise and only a moment passes before I lay eyes on the striking bird that disrupted the morning air.

Avian drumstick

It is a stately, angular bird. Large, mostly black with white facial stripes and a brilliant red crest like Woody Woodpecker. The bird is a pileated woodpecker and it is male as I can see the tell-tale red "moustache" he wears on his face. Knock-knock-knock-knock-knock-knock-knock-knock! The woodpecker is hammering loudly and rapidly on a handy resonant surface—a thick, dry tree branch! This hammering is called drumming and with its beak and body the pileated woodpecker beats forcefully like an avian drumstick on a wooden drum.

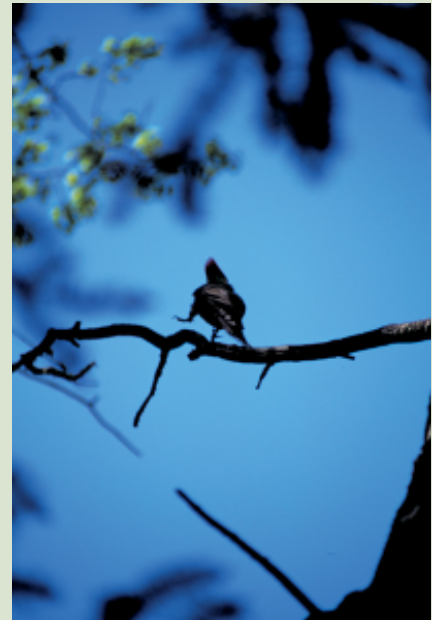
Warblers and thrushes are celebrated for their melodious, ear-pleasing song. Pileated woodpeckers do not have such distinguished voices and instead have a repertoire of raspy sounding calls. But pileated woodpeckers have an alternative method of communicating that is musical in a percussive kind of way—drumming. Drumming is done by both sexes and may be used to attract a mate or used as a territorial defense signal.



It is late April, so this male might be drumming to announce to other pileated woodpeckers that this is his territory. Drumming is a common activity all year round but especially during the period just before the breeding season.

Nest excavation

During this popular drumming time, pileated woodpeckers are also busy excavating new nest cavities high in large, tall trees, often in trembling aspen that show signs of decay. Decay makes the wood softer and easier to excavate. It takes about six weeks to complete the nest cavity and egg laying begins after the cavity is complete. The female pileated woodpecker lays one egg per day in the mostly bare cavity bottom and can lay from one to six eggs in total. White eggs are about three



A pileated woodpecker marches along a dead tree limb.

The Foothills Model Forest pileated woodpecker study was initiated in 1993 to determine whether pileated woodpeckers might be adversely affected by timber management practices. The study followed 32 radio-tagged adult pileated woodpeckers over three years and data was collected on pileated woodpecker foraging ecology and cavity tree preferences. Pileated woodpeckers are not likely to become a species at risk in the forest community. However, the study recommended several important management steps to improve the quality of current and future pileated woodpecker habitat.



Fungal conks resemble horses' hooves and are a sure sign of decay.

centimeters long and are polished with a semi-gloss finish.

The female spends most of her time at the nest over the next 18 days, though her mate often takes over incubation responsibilities during the night. In Alberta's Foothills forests, pileated woodpeckers tend to lay four eggs but often only three young survive the first five days. Adults will remove unhatched eggs, shells and dead young from the nest. Hatchlings are featherless, completely helpless and make a rasping begging call when hungry.

Did you know...

The pileated woodpecker is the largest North American woodpecker as the larger ivory-billed woodpecker is likely extinct. It is the fourth largest woodpecker in the world.

Brooding

The male does not spend all his time drumming. He shares brooding responsibilities (looking after the young) with the female. Both parents feed the young by regurgitation. One parent keeps the young warm on the nest while the other is out foraging.

By the twelfth day after hatching, the young are strong enough to climb to the nest entrance to be fed. By this time they have developed feathers and don't need their parents to brood them to keep them warm. In another two weeks the young will fly from the nest. They remain with their parents until fall before leaving in search of their own territories.



The young are fed by regurgitation. Both male and female share feeding responsibilities.

Alberta's pileated woodpeckers



Many pileated woodpeckers make Alberta's Foothills forests their home.

Pileated woodpeckers in Alberta's Foothill forests are thriving. Compared to other regions like Oregon and Montana, Alberta's pileated woodpeckers are reproducing at high and consistent rates. The productivity of pileated woodpeckers combined with the focus on management of the species by forest companies and conservationists, will ensure Alberta's future forests have a continuous supply of avian drumsticks beating out their spring tunes.