



The red-headed woodpecker dazzles the view with its plumage. The male and female look alike. Note the long zygodactyl toes on this species common to woodpeckers. Photo Jason Husband.

Red-headed Woodpecker By J. Morton Galetto

A flash of dark wings disappears and reappears, white patches accenting each wing beat. The stroboscopic effect captures my eye. When the wings tuck against the body the robin-sized bird navigates forward missile-like, undulating along on an invisible roller coaster. On the glides, the red crown, forehead, nape, and throat become prominent. This is what happens when a red-headed woodpecker flaps and coasts past.



This adult is caching a meal in the bark of this tree, for a later meal. Its outstretched wing allows you to see the white secondaries in relation to the black primaries. Photo by Faintt – cropped.

Many years ago artist Glenn Rudderow told me that colors are impacted by the shades they are painted next to; it's all about contrasts and strokes. When it comes to contrasts our subject species, the red-headed woodpecker, has a fashion sense of red-carpet magnitude, oh là là.

When its wings are outstretched they and the body make a white T, surrounded by black. The secondaries are white (inner wing feathers), as is the rump, upper tail-covers, and belly. The tail feathers, primaries, and coverts are black.

Let's have a bit of anthropomorphic fun: picture a person dressed in a white

shirt, tail out, with white pants, black riding boots, a short-waisted black jacket, a red balaclava, and then paint his nose silver as a finishing touch – voilà, ready for the masquerade party: one red-headed woodpecker. You're in luck; that is about the extent of my French vocabulary.

The males and females dress identically. Juveniles, on the other hand, lack the coloring but have the same patterning. These striking birds have historically been the poster child of the Endangered and Nongame Species check-off program and Conserve Wildlife that encourages New Jersey citizens to support the efforts to protect the State's rare species and their habitats.



The immature red-headed woodpecker has the same pattern as the adult but lacks the coloring. Photo Jason Husband.



Conserve Wildlife

N.J. Division of Fish & Wildlife
Endangered & Nongame Species Program



The red-headed woodpecker has been a symbol of Conserve Wildlife and the New Jersey's Endangered Wildlife Fund Tax Check-Off. The program enables New Jerseyans to support the Endangered and Nongame Species Program that helps to protect our state's rare wildlife. A number of vanity plates are fashioned after our State's rare species like this one featuring the red-headed woodpecker.

Sadly this dapper bird is on our list of rare species. It is classified as threatened in not only New Jersey but most of the northeastern United States. Its decline started in the late 1800s; it is one of the avian species that was impacted by the feather trade when plumes were in fashion for hats, especially true from 1909-1912. This period of "murderous millinery" threatened extinction of many

creatures, especially those whose breeding plumage was in high demand.

The advent of the car has impacted the bird as well; vehicle collisions plague them. Further, like all cavity nesters it was affected by colonization and the industrial revolution, both of which greatly impacted its forest homes. Their numbers continue to decline in spite of restoration efforts.

The red-headed woodpecker has some other interesting habitat needs. It likes a mature forest with a low understory. In southern New Jersey our Pineland forests with their oak/pine canopy and blueberry/huckleberry understory are favored. If the understory grows into a higher shrub-like environment the woodpeckers generally abandon it. While widely distributed in the state they are few in number.

A savanna-like environment of warm-weather grasses, sparse understory, and widely-spread trees is often attractive to them as well. They inhabit both upland and forested wetland. For nesting, trees must be mature enough to provide the required cavities.

Because of their attraction to low understory, occasionally they are found in a shady cemetery that is free of sod but has more natural, grassy orchards,

and even in suburban parks - but only if there are widely spaced trees and snags for nesting.

The birds are omnivores, eating insects, reptiles, mammals, birds, and forest mast. Mast consists of seeds, fruit, acorns, chestnuts and the like. Lizards, eggs, rodents, and nestlings of other birds are on the menu. They can catch invertebrates on the wing and cache them tightly into bark crevices to be eaten later. They are known to defend their food reserves.



Red-headed woodpeckers are skilled hunters, often catching insects in flight. While insects, fruits and seeds make up

much of their diet, they'll sometimes even eat mice! Photo by Jim Hudgins/ USFWS

Outside of breeding season they are primarily nomadic seekers of forest mast, essentially travelling to find food resources.

Like other woodpeckers they are well-designed for navigating the trunks of trees with their zygodactyl feet. These long toes face two forward and two backward, and grip the bark with dexterity. Conversely passerines' feet are normally three forward-facing toes and one backward, designed to wrap around branches. Waterfowl often have webbed toes for walking on muddy surfaces.

On my recent forest sightings these birds have remained mostly silent. Primarily they drum, squeak, rattle softly, or let out a squeak described as a "querr." They are capable of carrying on but in most of my encounters they have been rather stealthy. But the red-headed woodpecker is uncommon for the most part and so my encounters reflect that rarity.

This is the time of year for courtship, when a male introduces a female to a number of nesting cavities and she seals the deal by picking her favorite. She will lay 4-5 eggs early in May to

late June. Incubation is two weeks and care takes about a month. Adults split all parental duties from incubation to feeding. Occasionally a pair will have two broods in a season.

Some pairs will use a nesting site over the course of a number of years, presumably if the forest bounty is sufficient and the understory remains low.

Habitat loss is their single greatest threat. Jane Fitzgerald of the American Bird Conservancy, Coordinator of Central Hardwoods Joint Venture, which is an initiative to restore natural communities in open oak and pine-oak woodlands, described the bird's dilemma and habitat needs well. "The Red-headed Woodpecker is the poster child of savanna-woodland systems. It's critically important that the public support the kind of management – such as thinning and prescribed fire on ecologically-appropriate sites – needed to restore healthy populations on both public and private lands."

Sources

Endangered and Threatened Wildlife of New Jersey,
B. Beans and L. Niles, entry Sherry Liguori.
American Bird Conservancy – *Red-headed Woodpecker*