

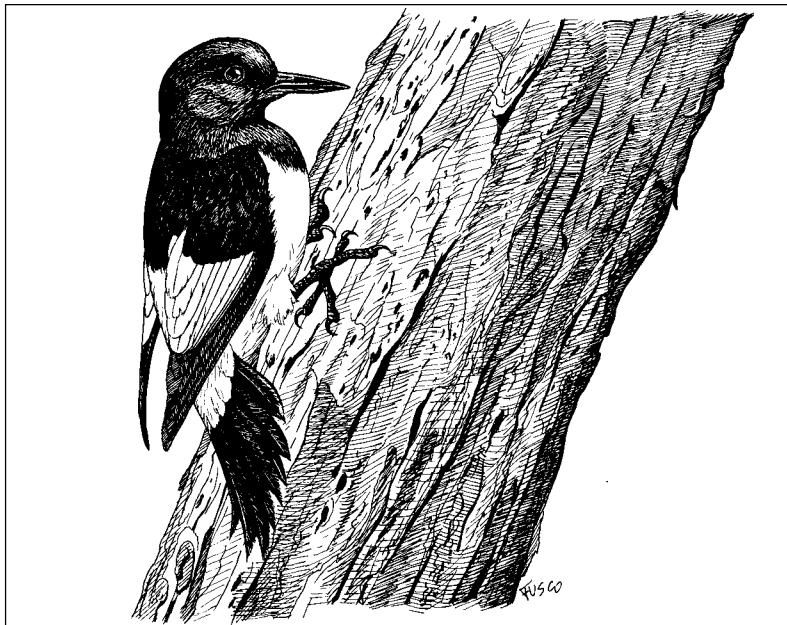
WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

ENDANGERED AND THREATENED SPECIES SERIES

RED-HEADED WOODPECKER

Melanerpes erythrocephalus

ENDANGERED



Habitat: Open woodlands, groves of large trees in old fields, and wooded swamps; nest in cavities in snags (dead or dying trees).

Weight: 2.33-3 ounces.

Length: 8.5-9.5 inches.

Wingspan: 16-18 inches.

Life Expectancy: Some banded birds have lived more than 10 years.

Food: Insects (ants, wasps, beetles, grasshoppers), centipedes, spiders, berries, small fruits, and mast (dry fruit from woody plants). Acorns and other mast make up most of the winter diet.

Status: State endangered.

Identification: The red-headed woodpecker is the only woodpecker in North America with an entirely red head and neck. The back is solid black and the belly is white. Distinctive white inner wing patches and a white rump are especially noticeable in flight. Immature birds have a buff-brown or "dusky" head and back. Both sexes are similar in appearance. The call is a high-pitched "queerk" and a rolling, repeated "kwurr kwurr."

Range: Red-headed woodpeckers are found throughout all the central and eastern United States. However, populations are sparsely distributed within this range. The woodpecker occurs from southern central Canada, east to southern Ontario and Quebec, south through New England to southern Florida, and west through the Gulf Coast to Texas and New Mexico.

Reproduction: Nesting cavities are excavated in isolated snags at almost ground level up to over 80 feet above the ground. The woodpeckers will also use existing cavities for nesting. The 4 to 8 eggs (average 5) are laid one per day on a bed of wood chips. Both adults excavate the cavity, incubate the eggs, feed the young, and defend the nest. The eggs hatch in approximately 14 days and the young birds leave the nest about 27 days later. The fledglings remain near the nest site but may be driven away if the adults begin to raise a second brood.

Reason for Decline: A decline in farming and the associated loss of open woodlots through forest succession have reduced the amount of suitable habitat for the red-headed woodpecker in Connecticut.

Competition for suitable nesting cavities with the non-native European starling has also contributed to the decline in populations. The aggressive starlings often take over cavities excavated by woodpeckers.

History in Connecticut: Since the mid-1800s, red-headed woodpeckers have nested in scattered locations across the state. As old field and grassland habitats, large, old trees, and snags have disappeared, red-headed woodpecker populations have declined. Competition with starlings for nesting cavities has also contributed to the woodpecker's decline in the state. The red-headed woodpecker is now considered one of the rarest breeding birds in the state. The woodpeckers can be seen in Connecticut in greater numbers during fall migration, but they seldom winter here, unless acorns or other mast crops are extremely plentiful.

Interesting Facts: Red-headed woodpeckers are less likely to drill for food than other woodpeckers. Instead, they fly down to the ground to capture insects, bluebird-style, or they catch prey from the air. They have been known to wedge live beetles or grasshoppers into cracks in wood to store them for future use. They will also use tree cavities to store acorns for the winter. Like blue jays and crows, red-headed woodpeckers have been known to steal eggs from the nests of smaller, cavity-nesting, birds.

Red-headed woodpeckers are frequently killed by vehicles while searching for food along roads and highways.

Although red-headed woodpeckers are migratory in their northern and western range limits, they may remain year-round in warmer southern climates.

Because of its striking red head and white breast, this bird has historically been called patriotic bird, flag bird, half-a-shirt, white shirt, shirt-tail bird, and jelly coat. It has also been called redhead and tricolored woodpecker.

Protective Legislation: *Federal* - Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. *State* - Connecticut General Statutes Sec. 26-311.

What You Can Do: Whenever possible, snags should be retained in forested areas and along woodland openings to benefit red-headed woodpeckers and other snag-dependent wildlife species. The maintenance of open woodlots, old fields, and pasture land is also important for encouraging use of these habitats by red-headed woodpeckers. Discouraging the nesting activities of the non-native European starling will also help lessen competition for existing nest sites.

CONNECTICUT RANGE

