

Wildlife in New Jersey

The Red-headed Woodpecker

The red-headed woodpecker is one of New Jersey's most distinctive birds with its strong contrasts of red, white and black. While it is listed as a threatened species in the state, there may soon be more of them around — immortalized on a new license plate designed to raise money for wildlife conservation.

The new plate features the woodpecker perched on a tree with a splash of green leaves at the bottom. The plates cost \$50, and more than 80 percent of the proceeds raised will go directly to the Division of Fish, Game and Wildlife's Endangered and Nongame Species Program to help save threatened and endangered species in the state.

The red-headed woodpecker, *Melanerpes erythrocephalus*, is about the size of a robin, measuring 8.5 inches long with a wing span of 17 inches. Unlike many bird species, the adult male and female are identical in appearance. In flight, the entire back half of the bird appears white because of patches of the color on the outstretched wings and rump. The young birds also have the white patches on their wings and rump, but they are buffy brown on the head, throat and back.

There is only one other North American woodpecker with a completely red head and throat — the red-breasted sapsucker found in the western part of the continent.

Red-headed woodpeckers prefer to live in open forests. They can be found in mature woods featuring large trees with a closed canopy and sparse ground vegetation or park-like areas in groves of trees where plants have been cut or lawn maintained. They also use forested areas which have been opened up by fire or selective cutting, and areas of dead and dying trees created by floods or fires.

Since acorns and nuts are important winter foods, red-headed woodpeckers usually live in forests where these nut-producing trees can be found.

The diet of these woodpeckers is as

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varied as their methods of feeding. They will eat animal and plant matter, depending on what is available during the season. While they generally eat ants and beetles, they also feed on grasshoppers, crickets, moths, caterpillars and spiders. These birds often eat on the ground, but they also glean insects off of bark and take fruit and berries from trees and shrubs.

The woodpeckers have also been observed fly-catching, swooping down from a perch to catch flying insects. One naturalist also discovered a red-headed woodpecker storing live grasshoppers in a crack in a fence post. More than 100 live grasshoppers were wedged so tightly they could not escape. The bird used this store of insects throughout the season, a practice farmers report having seen on several occasions.

The red-headed woodpecker also stores acorns and beech and hickory nuts in existing holes and cavities in trees for use during the winter. The availability of these winter foods is believed to influence whether the birds will migrate.

The woodpecker uses its long, narrow beak for several "pecking" purposes — from foraging for insects in trees, to hollowing out a nest, to attracting a mate

by "drumming" on the side of a tree.

The nesting season for this species begins in May in New Jersey. Nest cavities are usually excavated in large, dead trees or limbs. Red-headed woodpeckers appear to prefer locations without bark that can provide vertical openings.

It takes one to two weeks for the bird to hollow out its nest. The entrance hole is usually about two inches in diameter, and the inner cavity averages 11 inches deep and four inches wide. The bottom of the cavity is lined with fine wood chips.

The female lays an average of five eggs, which are incubated by both the male and the female. Hatching occurs in 14 days, and the young are fed by both adults. The chicks are able to leave the nest at approximately three weeks of age. Red-headed woodpeckers will usually raise two broods in a single breeding season.

The red-headed woodpecker is listed as a threatened species in New Jersey, and its survival here may be in danger if conditions continue to deteriorate. The reason for this decline has been the loss of forested habitat in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as well as the advent of the automobile and the increase in roads and traffic. This woodpecker's habit of feeding on the ground and swooping across roads have made it vulnerable to vehicle collisions. In 1924, 39 dead red-headed woodpeckers were found on a 211-mile stretch of gravel road in Iowa. And this was before the days of bumper-to-bumper traffic traveling at 55 miles per hour.

With the help of the Wildlife Conservation plate, New Jersey hopes to revive the red-headed woodpecker — and other endangered and threatened species in the state. For more information or to get an application, call 1-800-W-PLATES.

by Jim Sciascia, a principal nongame zoologist with the DEPE's Division of Fish, Game and Wildlife



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