

# Woodpecker Damage



**A Simple Solution to  
a Common Problem**



**TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE**

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Printing: TPW Print Shop

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## Introduction

There have been 16 species of woodpeckers recorded in Texas, including the Ivory-billed that is probably extinct. The group includes woodpeckers, flickers, and sapsuckers. Several of these species occur in urban settings and have become a problem by making holes in man-made structures. The main culprits in Texas are Pileated and Red-bellied woodpeckers, and the Northern Flicker. Problems can arise in places you wouldn't normally expect them, like heavily wooded areas where these birds *appear* to have an adequate supply of trees and snags (standing dead trees). These birds are simply searching for a place to call home and you can help provide them with such a place.

Woodpeckers hammer or peck on wood or metal for three distinct reasons. The first has to do with **foraging**, and is the most commonly (yet incorrectly) used explanation for all the noise and damage created. The second reason for hammering is called **drumming** whereby the male announces his claim to a territory by tapping in rapid succession on resonating wood or metal. This is usually done before or during the breeding season, usually February through July, and serves a similar function as singing in songbirds. Drumming is loud, but it is typically short-lived and shouldn't be considered as an endless or destructive problem. The third form of hammering is destructive – and the word “nuisance” fits into the equation. It is called **excavating (or chiseling)** whereby either males or females construct a nest or roost hole with a chamber typically in trees. This is the most common cause of damage. The cavity produced is an upside down L-shaped chamber with an entrance tunnel that angles down at 90 degrees to the chamber where the bird sleeps or rears its young. Unfortunately, some woodpeckers try to place such a cavity in the side of a house, barn, utility pole, fence post, or other man-made structure.

Like most birds, woodpeckers breed in the spring, but they roost in holes (one bird per cavity) each and every night of the year. When aggressive woodpeckers are a problem, all one has to do is provide a man-made nest box directly at the site that is being damaged. People often put up bluebird boxes or purple martin houses to attract those species; this is basically the same thing, but more to accommodate the woodpecker. As you continue to read this pamphlet, you will see plans for building such boxes, and you will read a true story behind the model home that experienced extensive woodpecker damage in the past.

### **The Solution**

Over the years, there have been many solutions proposed for this problem. Most have come from “product-driven” companies trying to make a sale without identifying the actual cause of the problem. There are many expensive products: from pepper sprays to special paint additives that supposedly deter woodpeckers. These products usually do not work since woodpeckers are actively chiseling away wood and they do not ingest or taste what they are excavating. Woodpeckers even chisel away at creosote-soaked utility poles with no harmful effects to the bird.

An exception to the woodpecker damage mentioned above are the feeding wells created by Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, a wintering bird in most urban sites in Texas. These sapsuckers make holes in the bark of any sap-flowing trees (usually young trees). The birds later visit these wells to eat the sap along with any insects caught in this sticky substance.

This publication includes plans to construct your own nest/roost boxes. These plans were made available with permission from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. Should you choose not to construct your own box, there are several places that sell them. Simply run a search on the internet, or visit your local bird supply store. Good luck in satisfying both you and the woodpecker; it can be done and it certainly makes a great conversational piece!

# Pileated Woodpecker Damage to a Cedar-sided House Near Huntsville, Texas

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*This L-shaped hole was large enough for a large raccoon to enter.*



*Seven holes are visible here, some with insulation hanging out. These holes measure at least 5"x5" each. Notice the ineffective owl decoy in the lower left-hand corner.*



*The woodpeckers pecked through the outside wood, then through the sheetrock, and into the house. This hole measured about 5"x6".*



*A content Pileated Woodpecker peering out of this man-made box as the bird is about to go to roost. This inexpensive and simple solution satisfied both the birds and the homeowners. These nestboxes (parts, labor, installation) are easy and inexpensive and can be used on any man-made structure that's being damaged by woodpeckers (e.g., telephone poles, buildings, etc.).*

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## If You Build it, the Log-god Will Come

A Story About A Family's Battle Over A House With The Pileated Woodpecker

by Clifford E. Shackelford

*Reprinted with permission from the Texas Parks and Wildlife magazine where it originally appeared in the July 1998 issue of that magazine.*

It sounds like something out of an old "Woody Woodpecker" cartoon, but to San Jacinto County residents Peter and Pam Jones, visits to their wood house by local Pileated Woodpeckers ("Log-gods") was not funny. The Jones's house near Houston stands 43 feet tall and is covered in tobacco-brown cedar paneling, mighty tempting for a woodpecker.

During the past six years the battle over the house's exterior has been continuous. As soon as the Joneses patched a hole, the woodpeckers would build yet another in a matter of hours. Over the years they have patched more than 50 woodpecker holes.

Pileateds are large birds, and distinguished from other East Texas woodpeckers by their black and white color, flowing red crest and loud crackling call. It's hard to miss the birds' deep, rectangular-shaped holes they leave behind in trees while out foraging for insects.

The birds plaguing the Joneses were not feeding, but excavating holes used for roosting and nesting, a distinction probably lost on the beleaguered homeowners. The birds nest in the cavities they excavate during the spring and summer, and for the entire year adults roost in these holes to escape predators and to avoid the weather.

The owners tried numerous tactics recommended by various "experts" in the field of damage/pest control like placing rubber snakes and horned owl decoys on the house. The woodpeckers have pecked all the eyes out of the three owl decoys. One so-called "expert" recommended the use of jalapeno pepper juice sprayed on the exterior of the house to retard the use by the woodpeckers. Numerous gallons of this pepper juice were applied, but it did not slow the excavation process at all. After all, the woodpeckers aren't tasting the wood, they are diligently chiseling the wood away.

Before resorting to vinyl siding, the homeowners started to seek other ways of keeping the woodpeckers off the house. This species, like most birds, is protected by law and shooting the birds was unlawful. After numerous phone calls to various experts in the field of ornithology (the study of birds), the homeowners contacted Texas Partners in Flight (PIF), part of the Nongame and Urban Program of Texas Parks and Wildlife in Austin. This is a bird conservation effort that consists of bird enthusiasts from numerous state and federal agencies, universities, private industries, bird clubs and local birdwatchers.

## If You Build it, the Log-god Will Come

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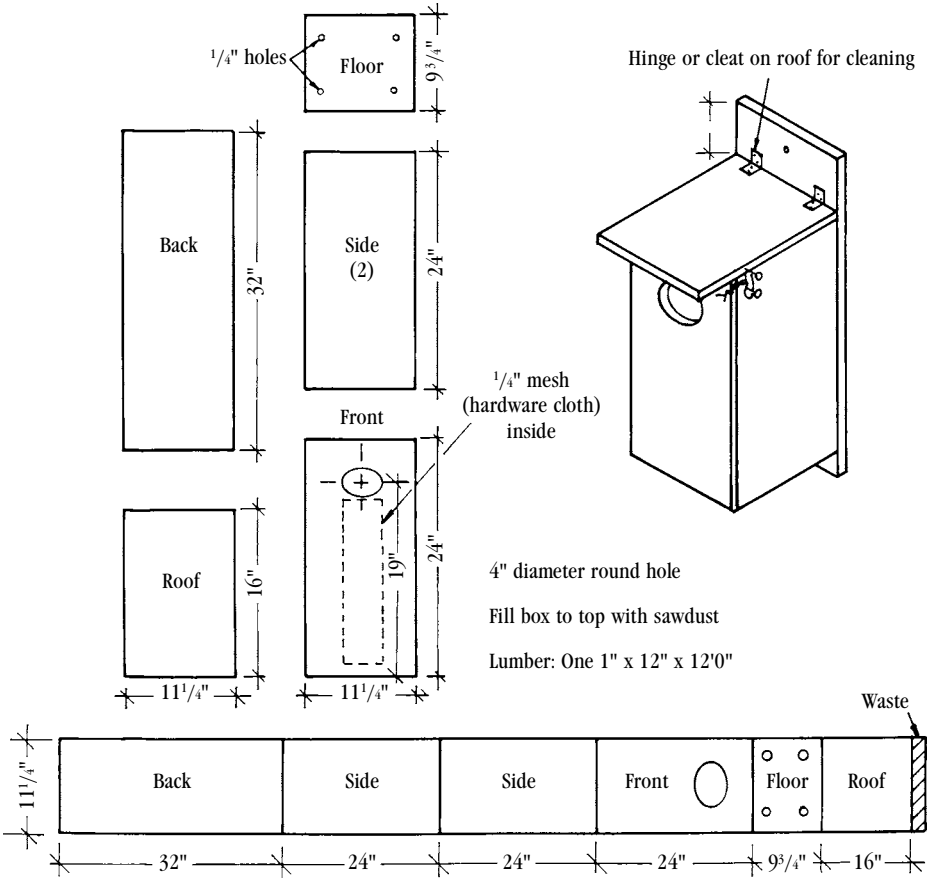
The state coordinator of PIF at the time was Cecilia Riley, who soon forwarded the call to me while I was working for the U.S. Forest Service's Southern Research Station in nearby Nacogdoches. My duties there included a great deal of woodpecker research, but on the "natural" biology and habitat preferences of woodpeckers, not woodpecker damage control to artificial surfaces. I inspected the house with friend and biologist, Chris Collins, and after a great deal of brainstorming, we concluded that a different approach should be taken. Instead of denying the birds a living space, why not provide the birds with a home. We recommended large bird boxes (bird houses, if you will) attached to the house in hopes the woodpeckers would seek refuge in these custom-built nest/roost boxes.

Jack Williams, a local contractor who had been patching most of the holes over the years, built and erected these boxes. The pine boxes, painted tobacco brown like the house, measured 24 by 12 by 12 inches with a four-inch diameter entrance hole\*. They resemble the much smaller bluebird box that is commonly used by bluebirds, southern flying squirrels, titmice, chickadees, nuthatches, treefrogs, wasps, and others. A pine stick was nailed to the facade as a perch for the birds. About two inches of pine straw and leaves were added to the inside of the box to cushion the bottom of these hard, square boxes.

Four boxes were fastened to the exterior of the house in early November 1996, one facing each of the cardinal directions, plus a fifth box facing southwest where the most damage seemed to occur. The remaining holes on the house created by the woodpeckers were patched when the boxes were established in hopes that the birds would seek refuge in these manmade homes. Almost immediately, two or three of the boxes were occupied by these woodpeckers and further excavations into the house ceased. The birds were seen entering the boxes in the evening or exiting in the early morning. The boxes facing west, southwest and east had all been used by the pileateds. The south-facing box was occupied by another cavity-roosting species, an eastern screech-owl. The north-facing box, which in winter would be the one experiencing the coldest nights, was not occupied. Currently, the boxes are being monitored in hopes that the pileated woodpeckers will continue to use them and possibly nest in the spring. So far, the homeowners and the woodpeckers are pleased with the results and it was a very cheap, efficient method of dealing with the problem. It is yet another example of how people can adjust a little and live in harmony with nature.

*\* see additional and more detailed building instructions in this booklet*

# Pileated (Large-sized) Woodpecker Nest/Roost Box

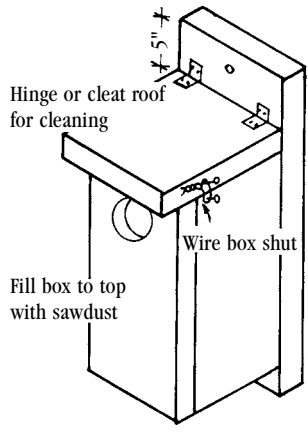
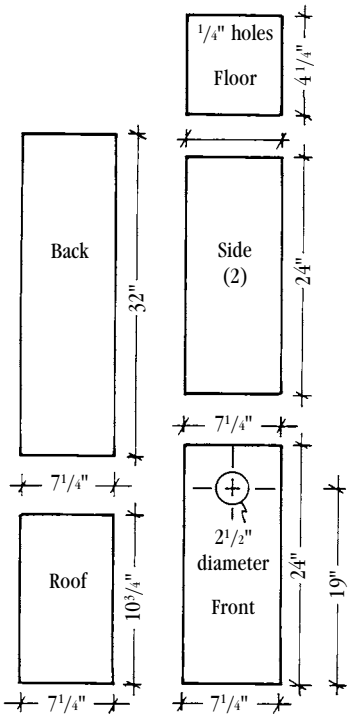


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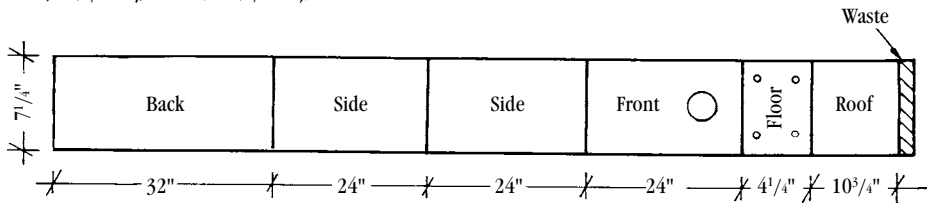
For a copy of the complete book, please call the Minnesota DNR at 651-296-6157.



# Northern Flicker or Red-bellied (Medium-sized) Woodpecker Nest/Roost Box



Lumber: One 2"x8"x10'0"



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McDONALD OBSERVATORY AT MOUNT LOGKE  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

*Observatory: P. O. Box 1337, Ft. Davis, Texas 79734 • Telephone: (915) 426-3263*

6 March 2000

To Whom It May Concern:

In October - November 1999, visiting scientists at the University of Texas - Austin McDonald Observatory complained that woodpeckers were hammering on the outside walls of the Transients' Quarters (TQ), keeping everyone awake. Our guests were quite irate. The TQ is a 16 room, motel-like facility where visiting astronomers sleep and dine while working at the Observatory's research facilities.

I determined that Northern Flickers were responsible for the hammering. But I did not know how to discourage the flickers. In discussion with my staff, I found that similar hammering problems were occurring at two of the Observatory's residences.

For advice, I turned to biologists I know in West Texas and Austin. I discovered that Clifford Shackelford was working on nuisance woodpecker mitigation methods. He had specific suggestions regarding what we should and should not do. Mr. Shackelford told me that these flickers were looking for roost sites. He was confident our problems would end if we installed suitable roost sites at the TQ and the residences.

Since he had obviously given this much thought, I took Mr. Shackelford's advice. The Observatory purchased five units of a commercially available roosting box, in a size suitable for flickers. Our Physical Plant staff installed two boxes on the TQ and another two at the residences with problems. To my delight, the hammering problems ended immediately after the installation of these roost boxes. The flickers have been using three of these boxes regularly. No other problems have been reported.

The roost boxes cost \$50 each. It required 1.0 person-hour to install each of the four boxes (4.0 person-hours total, \$60). Thus, we have spent \$310 to solve our problem. It is difficult to place a value on a lost night's sleep. But I view this \$310 as small. Tired employees and astronomers make mistakes in a telescope dome in the middle of the night.

The solution provided by Mr. Shackelford was effective and easy to implement. It was also accommodated the local wildlife. I extend the Observatory's sincere thanks and gratitude to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and to Mr. Shackelford.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark T. Adams".

Dr. Mark T. Adams  
Superintendent  
McDonald Observatory

For more information on the woodpeckers of Texas, please see the  
TPW Web site at:  
[www.tpwd.state.tx.us/nature/birding](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/nature/birding)



Texas Partners in Flight is in the  
Wildlife Diversity Program  
of Texas Parks and Wildlife



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