

# Controlling **WOODPECKER** *Damage*

Several species of woodpeckers, flickers and sapsuckers live in a variety of habitats throughout Texas. All of these species depend on trees for food and shelter. Their short legs usually have four toes, two pointed forward and two pointed backward, and sharp claws which enable them to cling easily to tree trunks and branches. Stiff tail feathers act as a brace or a prop against the tree. A stout, sharply pointed beak is well adapted for pecking into wood in search of insects. Berries, fruit, nuts and seeds also make up part of the diet of some species.

Woodpeckers, flickers and sapsuckers are 5 to 15 inches in length, usually with brightly contrasting coloration. Black and white markings are common on many species. Most males have some red on their heads. Their flight is usually an undulating series of rapid wing flaps followed by short glides with wings folded against the body.

## **Damage**

Woodpeckers, flickers and sapsuckers are an interesting and beneficial part of our environment. However, their hammering or drumming on buildings and other structures may cause damage.

Drumming is the term given to the woodpecker's habit of pecking rapidly on a hard surface. It serves the same function that song does for other birds. In the spring woodpeckers drum

on resonant surfaces to establish territories and to attract mates.

Metal items such as gutters, downspouts and TV antennas may be chosen for drumming sites. The noise may be irritating, but metal surfaces are seldom damaged. When woodpeckers drum on wooden structures such as siding, eaves, trim boards, fence posts and utility poles, or create holes while searching for insects or excavating nesting cavities in such structures, damage may be extensive. These holes can be round and smooth or vertical, rough gashes that are one to several inches long. New damage problems may arise as manmade materials, such as plastic, are used in building construction. Woodpeckers, particularly sapsuckers, also may damage ornamental and fruit trees.

## **Control Methods**

Woodpeckers can be extremely persistent and are not easily driven from their territories or from their selected drumming sites. Control methods should be employed as soon as the problem is identified and before territories are well established. A combination of control methods may be needed.

## **Repellents**

Visual and auditory repellents may be effective in deterring woodpeckers from drumming, especially if used soon after the damage begins. Hawk or falcon silhouettes can be constructed



**Figure 1.** Woodpeckers are common throughout much of Texas, and are often found in urban and suburban areas.

from plywood, cardboard or construction paper, then painted black and hung from the eaves of the building near the damage site (see Fig. 2). Owl silhouettes or decoys and rubber snakes are, for the most part, ineffective.

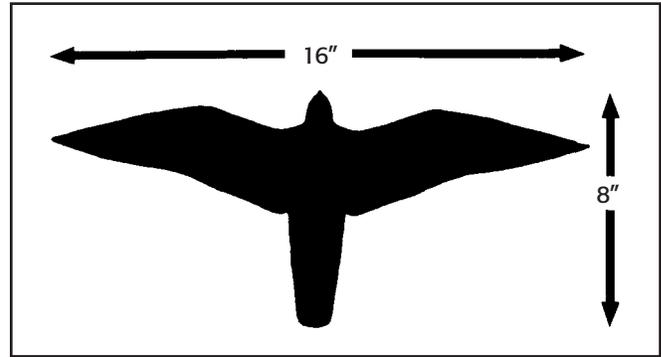
Aluminum foil strips or brightly colored plastic strips 2 to 3 inches wide and 2 to 3 feet long can be attached to a 6-inch-long string and nailed above the

damage site or tied to a hanger in front of the drumming site. Other types of frightening devices include pie pans, toy plastic twirlers, wind chimes and brightly colored balloons.

Loud noises from hand clapping, toy cap pistols, banging on a garbage can lid or a pot, or a radio placed near the drumming site may frighten the bird from the area. The use of auditory repellents must be persistent to be effective. Ultrasonic devices are available to repel birds, but their effectiveness is questionable.

Pulsating water sprinklers sometimes can be effective in repelling a woodpecker from the side of a building. The stream of water should be directed to hit the area the woodpecker is damaging. The sprinkler can be turned on whenever the bird begins drumming and left on until it flies away, or it can be turned on at frequent intervals throughout the day. The idea is to harass the bird until it decides to seek a more peaceful area.

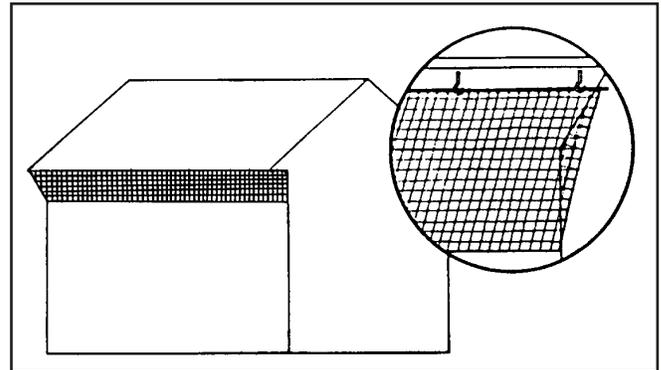
There are currently no taste or odor repellents registered for use on woodpeckers. Tactile repellents are available at many pest control supply stores and can be applied to areas where woodpeckers are actively causing damage. The sticky or tacky repellent does not trap the birds, but they dislike the tacky surface. A word of caution: The repellent is very messy and may discolor the material to which it is applied.



**Figure 2.** Woodpeckers can sometimes be discouraged by placing a hawk or falcon silhouette near the area being damaged. The silhouette can be cut from black construction paper according to the dimensions above.

### Barriers

If the damage occurs under the eaves, netting can be attached to the overhanging eaves and angled back to the siding below the drumming site. Make sure that the netting is taut and leave at least 3 inches of space between the netting and the building (see Fig. 3).



**Figure 3.** Plastic netting can be attached to a building from the outside edge of the eave and angled back to the wood siding. The insert shows one method of attachment using hooks and wooden dowels.

Metal sheathing or 1/4-inch hardware cloth can be placed over the pecked areas on buildings, fence posts and utility poles. Both can be painted to match a building's color, if desired. If the woodpecker moves to an unprotected spot, the metal barrier will need to be expanded.

Ornamental and fruit trees can be protected by covering the damaged areas with 1/4-inch hardware cloth or by draping netting over the entire tree. The damaged areas should be sprayed with

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insecticides to prevent insects from entering these places, which may cause further damage to the tree or serve as an additional attractant for other woodpeckers.

### **Alternatives**

Insulation or other padded material may be placed behind the siding at the damage site to deaden or dull the sound. An alternate drumming site can be constructed from two overlapping boards. The back board should be securely fastened over or next to the damaged area. The front board should then be attached directly over the back board at only one end. When the woodpecker drums on this alternate site, a resonating sound is produced when the front board strikes the back board.

For indirect control of woodpeckers, siding infested with insects should be treated with an appropriate insecticide. Once the insects are gone, the woodpeckers will go elsewhere to find food. However, woodpeckers have been known to damage buildings, fence posts, and utility poles that were not infested with insects.

### **Toxicants**

There are currently no toxicants registered for use on woodpeckers.

### **Restrictions**

Woodpeckers are listed as migratory, non-game birds and are protected by state and federal laws. Live trapping or killing of woodpeckers may be attempted only after permits are issued by the Law Enforcement Division of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, if necessary.

For additional information, contact the nearest office of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service—Wildlife Services.

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