

Red-headed woodpecker, *Melanerpes erythrocephalus*

Status:

State: Threatened

Federal: Not listed

Identification

The red-headed woodpecker is a robin-sized bird, readily distinguished by its vibrant black, white, and red plumage. Brilliant red cloaks the head, neck, and throat and is separated from the white breast by a thin black border. The belly, undertail coverts, and rump are white, contrasting with the black tail, back, and upperwing coverts. White inner secondaries and tertials adjacent to black outer secondaries and primaries (flight feathers) form a white patch on the inner wing that is conspicuous in flight.

Though they lack the striking plumage of adults, juvenile red-headed woodpeckers are similarly patterned. The head and wings of juveniles are brown and the white belly has a variable amount of brown streaking. The back is brown with dark brown barring and the white wing patch is also marked with dark barring. During their first fall and winter, juveniles molt into adult plumage.

Although the male is slightly larger, the sexes are indistinguishable by plumage. On all ages and sexes, the iris is brown and the legs are gray. The chisel-shaped bill is heavy and colored blue-gray. Like other woodpeckers, the red-headed has zygodactyl feet, in which two toes point forward and two point backward, enabling it to cling vertically to trees. In addition, the tail feathers are stiff and pointed, serving to prop the woodpecker up against a tree. Red-headed woodpeckers fly low over the ground in an undulating manner. The call of the red-headed woodpecker is a repeated “qweer”.

Habitat

Red-headed woodpeckers inhabit open woods, both upland and wetland, that contain dead or dying trees and sparse undergrowth. Such habitat is often created by disturbances such as fire, flooding, or insect outbreaks. A sparse understory is favored for foraging and dead or dying trees are required for nesting. Red-headed woodpeckers occupy similar habitats throughout the year, seeking wintering sites such as open riparian or pine forests and orchards that contain nut and mast producing trees.

In southern New Jersey, typical red-headed woodpecker nesting sites include upland oak or mixed oak/pine forests that contain both living and dead trees. Pitch pine (*Pinus rigida*), white oak (*Quercus alba*), and red oak (*Q. rubra*) are often found in the overstory and lowbush blueberry (*Vaccinium vacillans*) or huckleberry (*Gaylussacia spp.*) dominate the ground cover. In northern New Jersey, red-headed woodpeckers breed in open upland forests, beaver marshes, or wetland forests associated with floodplains or



Photo courtesy NJ ENSP

swamps. Such wetland habitats, which often provide an abundance of dead trees, may contain oak (*Quercus spp.*), hickory (*Carya spp.*), elm (*Ulmus spp.*), and hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*) in the overstory and sedge (*Carex spp.*) on the ground.

Status and Conservation

During the late 1700s and 1800s, the red-headed woodpecker was a common and widespread species in the Northeast. In the 1870s and 1880s, large concentrations of these birds, including flights of several hundred, were observed during fall migration at New York and Long Island, where it is now an uncommon migrant. Stone (1965) stated that the red-headed woodpecker was a rare fall migrant at Cape May, with only one to two records, on average, per year. Currently, an average of eight per season is observed each fall at Cape May (Sibley 1997). This apparent increase in the number of birds recorded at Cape May is likely due to increased coverage by birders rather than an actual increase in red-headed woodpecker populations. Stone (1908) also described the red-headed woodpecker as a rare breeder in south Jersey that was “never found in the Pine Barrens.” However, this again may reflect a lack of coverage during historic times.

By the turn of the 20th century, red-headed woodpeckers had suffered population declines due to road mortality, competition with European starlings for nesting cavities, and harvesting for the millinery trade in which populations of many avian species were greatly reduced to provide feathers for women’s hats. Farmers at this time also killed red-headed woodpeckers because they damaged fruit and berry crops. Further population declines resulting from habitat loss, limited availability of nesting sites, and road mortality were noted from the 1930s to the 1970s. Red-headed woodpeckers experienced declines survey-wide on Christmas Bird Counts from 1959 to 1988 (Sauer et al. 1996). The Breeding Bird Survey detected annual declines of red-headed woodpeckers in New Jersey and the northeast from 1966 to 1999 (Sauer et al. 2001). Currently, the species is considered to be rare in the Northeast.

Due to population declines, the red-headed woodpecker was listed as a threatened species in New Jersey in 1979. The New Jersey Natural Heritage Program considers the red-headed woodpecker to be “demonstrably secure globally,” yet “imperiled in New Jersey because of rarity” (Office of Natural Lands Management 1998). Loss of breeding habitat and regional population declines in areas such as New Jersey and New York led the National Audubon Society to include the red-headed woodpecker on its Blue List of Imperiled Species in 1972 and from 1976 to 1981 (Arbib 1975, Tate 1986). In addition, the National Audubon Society has recognized the red-headed woodpecker as a species of special concern since 1982 (Tate 1986).