

Pileated Woodpecker, a prehistoric throwback

WARREN NELSON

With a loud cuk, cuk call, a large crow-sized bird floats into your bird feeders. At first sight, its distinct flight and shape makes you feel like you are looking at a relative of the pterodactyl, some relic of a long bygone age. If nothing else, it is definitely a throwback and an impressive bird to see at your feeders. Its body is basically black. It has a red crest, black mask and a white stripe which starts at the bill, runs across its cheek and down the side of the neck. The male has a distinct red mustache at the base of the bill, while the female has a black mustache and the female's crest doesn't cover the whole cap like the male's does. In flight, it displays white on the front half of the under-wings.

It is sometimes called the woodcutter for its habit of chiseling out large chips of wood with its powerful bill to get at ants and beetles. They also eat acorns, berries, grubs, flies, moths, seeds and, of course, suet at bird feeders.

I have often heard people say that they think that woodpeckers are damaging or even killing their trees. Nothing could be farther from the truth. It is the ants and beetles that are killing the trees; woodpeckers are just going after the killers. Woodpeckers beat their heads against the tree for no apparent reason.

Another interesting fact about the woodpecker is that football helmets are designed after them. The powers-to-be were looking for a way to protect their players heads and someone brought up the woodpecker. They beat their heads against trees all day long without doing any noticeable harm. So they looked at the woodpecker and found that the bill and skull of the woodpecker are actually all one piece. The skull is fairly thick but light weight and there is a

thick membrane surrounding the brain that absorbs the powerful blows it makes while digging for beetles. It can make these constant blows without doing any

damage to their brain. That is why that when you look at a football helmet, it is completely lined with a foam cushion and the face mask is solidly attached to the helmet itself. In football there are a lot of injuries,

but if you look closely at the statistics, there are very few head injuries and that's all thanks to the woodpecker.

In March, a pair of Pileated Woodpeckers will start to

the entrance hole is an oval shape about four inches long with the inside at about eight inches across and about 20 inches deep. There are a few chips of wood left on the floor to cushion the eggs. By early May, the pair starts nesting in earnest, taking turns incubating the three to four eggs, the female with the daytime duties and male takes over the nighttime shift. The eggs hatch out in 18 days. And the young start to grow feathers till after the first week. The young are fed by both parent birds just about all day long. It takes a lot of foraging and mouthfuls of insects to feed the young.

The young are actually sword swallowers – the parents sticking their long bills down the throats of their offspring and regurgitating a tasty meal. By the time that they are three- to four-weeks old, the begging of the young gets pretty loud – and steady. If you are within 100 feet, you should be able to hear them.

I can still remember helping to guide a group of birdwatcher from Japan as they saw a Pileated Woodpecker for the first time. Mouths opened in awe and there was a lot of excitement about it. Of course, I couldn't understand Japanese, but I could hear the excitement and imagine that they were seeing something right out of one of their early Japanese science fiction movies. I hope it will open mouths in awe for as long as I am around.



excavate a nest

hole. Around here, it is usually either in an aspen tree or in a variety of dead tree trunks usually 15 to 60 feet high. It is dug by both parents and can take up to 30 days to finish. When done,

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