

The Pileated Woodpecker is the largest woodpecker found in most of North America and is best recognized by its large black body and its red crest.

It is well adapted for climbing on vertical surfaces and is awkward on small branches and vines when reaching for fruit such as Strangler Figs. It occasionally hops on the ground when going short distances between fallen logs and limbs where it looks for food. The Pileated is a strong flyer with slightly undulating flight. Its flight is rather slow but vigorous and direct.

Because of its size and chisel-shaped bill, the Pileated is particularly adept at excavating, and it uses this ability to construct nests and roost cavities as well as to find food.

Pileated Woodpeckers sleep in roost cavities for the night, each bird normally sleeping alone, one per roost. Cavity roosting and nesting provides protection from the weather as well as from predators which include Cooper's Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Great Horned Owl, Barred Owl, and squirrels. Roost trees may have multiple entrance holes to provide alternate escape routes from predators.

The sound of Pileated Woodpecker hammering carries long distances.

When excavating cavities or looking for food, the hammering is loud, slow, and methodical.

Pileated also drum to attract mates and to establish the boundaries of their territories. Drumming usually occurs atop a dead tree that resonates sound, and is most frequent in the morning. It increases in frequency during early spring as courtship activities begin.

Drumming is done at 14.5-16.8 beats/second and tapers off at the end rather than ending abruptly as does the drumming of a Red-bellied Woodpecker.

## Pileated Woodpecker

*Dryocopus pileatus*



Drumming is used to proclaim a territory. When territorial conflicts occur, there is much chasing, calling, striking with wings, and jabbing with bills.

When foraging for food, the Pileated Woodpecker characteristically drills rectangular holes in trees to find its favorite food, Carpenter Ants. They also eat wood-boring beetle larvae, fruits, and nuts. The feeding excavations can be so broad and deep that they can weaken smaller trees, causing them to break.

The birds also use their chisel-like bills to pry and strip pieces of bark from trees looking for food. Generally, they help keep a forest healthy by eating



wood-boring insects and helping keep insect populations under control.

The Pileated Woodpecker has a long, barbed tongue and sticky saliva which it uses to capture prey like ants and beetle larvae (*photo at bottom of previous column*).

Pileated pairs establish territories, live on them throughout the year, and defend the territory in all seasons, but will tolerate floaters during the winter. They prefer large, older trees for nesting, usually dead, but in young forests, they will use any large tree. Pileated Woodpeckers are monogamous, staying with the same mate for life.

Both sexes excavate a cavity in tree from 15 to 125 feet above the ground. The oval entrance is taller than wide, about 4-6 inches in diameter. The cavities measure between 10 and 24 inches deep, and the birds construct a new one in their territory each year.

It can take a pileated pair six weeks to finish making the nest cavity. The cavity is unlined except for wood chips. During the day, both parents take turns incubating the eggs. At night, only the male incubates the eggs.

Four eggs are usually laid. They hatch in about two weeks and the young birds fledge after about a month. After fledging, the young depend on their parents for several months, at least until early autumn. The parents provide food for them and teach them to acquire their own food during this time.

In the fall, young leave their parents and wander until spring when they will nest and acquire their own territories.

### Cool Fact...

The Pileated Woodpecker has yellow bristly feathers over its nostrils that keep out wood chips when excavating a hole.

Identification: male, near right, has red mustache starting at lower bill and the red crest comes down to bill; female, center, lacks a mustache and red is only on crest.



"Pileated" comes from "pileus," a felt cap worn by ancient Romans. The bird's crest resembles the shape and placement of the pileus (pronounced pi-le-us).