

Red-bellied Woodpecker *Melanerpes carolinus*



The red belly



Juvenile



Female



Male

The Red-bellied Woodpecker is the most common woodpecker in the Southeast and is found in most of the eastern United States except for northern New England. A medium to large-sized woodpecker, it lives in a variety of dry or damp forests as well as in suburban areas where it is a familiar sight at bird feeders and in backyards.

The *red-bellied* comes from a light red wash on the belly, *above far left*, although it is usually hard to see. The name *red-headed* was already taken.

Adult males and females are easy to distinguish. The male's crown and nape of the neck are red while the breast and face are a dull gray, *above far right*. The female is similar but has red only on the nape and above the bill; her crown is gray, *above second from right*. Both are about nine inches in length, have a wingspread around 17 inches, and have bands of black and white on their backs, which are referred to as a "ladder back." Immature birds have little or no red on their heads and their crown has a brownish tint, *above second from left*.

Their calls are distinctive. There is a loud, often repeated *churrrrr* and a loud *chuck-chuck-chuck*, descending in pitch. The calls are usually short in duration as opposed to the long continuous calls of Pileated Woodpeckers.

Red-bellied Woodpeckers glean insects from bark, probe and excavate into dead wood, scale bark, hawk for flying insects, and hang upside down for berries,

which at Corkscrew includes figs, elderberries, and even Wax Myrtle. Favorite natural foods are insects, especially beetles, grasshoppers, and ants; seeds; fruit; and sap; and they will occasionally eat lizards, treefrogs, small fish, nestlings, birds, and eggs. In the winter when insects are harder to find, the Red-bellied Woodpecker's diet is mostly seeds, and it can often be found at bird feeders where it is fond of sunflower seed and of peanuts.

Drumming in early spring signals that the male Red-bellied Woodpecker is claiming territory and hopes to court a mate for a season of nesting and raising young. Similar to other woodpeckers, drumming is the primary source for attracting and communicating with potential mates and later for defining and defending a territory. The drumming may be done on hollow limbs, gutters, house siding, utility poles, or any other surface that resonates loudly.

Displays include crest raising, wing and tail spreading, bowing, and V-shaped flight. The actual courtship is simple: Red-bellied Woodpeckers tap their bills together. They are monogamous throughout the nesting season and some may form pair bonds that last over several seasons.

The nest cavity is built by both the male and female in a dead or dying tree or in a dead limb, and it takes about seven to ten days to finish. An unusual behavior during nest excavation is mu-

tual tapping at a potential nesting cavity. One bird enters while the other stays outside, and they take turns tapping to each other.

The cavity is lined with wood chips and is about a foot deep. New cavities are built each year, but pairs frequently use the same trees in successive years. Favored trees may have three or four cavities lined down the trunk.

The female lays from two to six eggs on the wood chips in the bottom of the cavity. Both male and female incubate the eggs for about 12 days with the male incubating at night. Eggs hatch in about three weeks and both parents care for the young. Chicks fledge in about a month but will stay with their parents until the fall.

Cool facts

- The male Red-bellied Woodpecker has a longer bill and a longer, wider tongue tip than the female. These adaptations may allow the male to reach deeper into furrows to extract prey and may allow the sexes to divide up the resources in one area.
- Red-bellied Woodpeckers compete vigorously for nest hole sites, but they are often evicted from completed nest cavities by European Starlings. Where starlings are common, half of all Red-bellied Woodpecker nesting cavities may be taken over by starlings.