

## ABOUT THE COVER: PILEATED WOODPECKER

The Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*) is a crow-sized bird, the largest North American woodpecker except for the probably extinct Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Its genus name, *Dryocopus*, means "tree cleaver" and its folk names, "big black woodpecker," "log-cock," "carpenter bird," and "cock of the woods," provide insight into the size and behavior of this spectacular bird with a chisel-like bill. The species name, *pileatus*, means "capped," and refers to its flaming red crest. In males the red area includes the forehead, while in the female the forehead is brownish or blackish; females lack the red mustache stripe of the male. On perched birds, the rest of the plumage appears black except for white chin and facial stripes which extend down the neck and disappear under the folded wings. In flight the wing linings and the base of the flight feathers are white, and from above a splash of white decorates the base of the primaries of each wing. Young birds are duskier than adults. Pileated Woodpeckers have slightly undulating flight with slow wingbeats. The species is polytypic with two to four subspecies recognized by various authorities.

Pileated Woodpeckers are permanent residents of deciduous and coniferous forests across much of southern Canada, most of the eastern half of the United States, and south to central California on the West Coast. In Massachusetts the species is considered an uncommon resident, local east of Worcester and largely absent on Cape Cod and the islands.

Pileated Woodpeckers are monogamous and most birds probably mate for life. Territorial pairs defend their "turf" year-round. They prefer older forests but are also found in younger forests with scattered old trees and snags where they can nest and roost. Their call has been described by various authors as a loud *cuk-cuk-cuk-cuk*, *Waa*, *Wok*, *Wuk*, *Woick*, *G-Waick*, or *Wichew*. Syllables may be given singly or in series, and females' calls are higher pitched than males'. Calls may involve courtship or territorial advertisement. The drumming, which is done by both sexes, is distinctive, starting slowly and then accelerating, ending in a roll up to three seconds later. Pileated Woodpeckers tend to choose drumming spots, such as knotholes on hollow limbs, that produce loud, resonating sounds. Territorial disputes may involve chases, frequent calling, and at close quarters, wing-flapping and bill-jabbing. Displays include crest-raising and head-swinging.

Males select the nest site, usually in a large dead tree, and do most of the excavating. The nest cavity may be one-and-a-half feet or more in depth, and may take several weeks to excavate. The openings are typically a distinctive oblong shape, and the pile of chips under a hole looks like someone has been working with an axe. Nests are rarely reused for nesting, but may be used for roosting. By May or June the usual clutch of four glossy-white eggs will be laid. Both males and females have brood patches and both birds incubate, the male

mostly at night. The incubation period is between two and three weeks, followed by a fledging period of about a month. Both parents feed the young by regurgitation. After about two weeks things get crowded, and the adults feed the young birds, heads sticking out of the nest-hole, from the outside. After fledging, the young stay with the parents for several months and may stay in the natal territory for nearly half a year.

The main prey of Pileated Woodpeckers are carpenter ants and wood-dwelling beetle larvae, which they reach by scaling bark off trees, stumps, and fallen logs with their chisel-like bills. They use their long, protrusile tongue (which is sticky and barbed) to extract prey. They are opportunistic and will glean branches for prey such as spruce budworm larvae. They also eat various fruit and nuts and will eat suet in winter.

The Pileated Woodpecker was rare in the east by the end of the nineteenth century due to deforestation, but began to recover by the 1930s and continued to increase as reforestation has progressed. Interestingly, it has been suggested that the Dutch Elm blight may have benefited Pileated Woodpeckers by providing a source of large dead trees. Habitat alteration, particularly where old-growth forest is eliminated and harvest rotations shortened, is a current and future problem, since these woodpeckers need large dead trees for nesting and roosting. The birds are subject to predation by large accipiters and owls, lightning is a problem, and in the past they were shot for food. But Pileated Woodpeckers have become fairly tolerant of humans, and Breeding Bird Survey data suggest that populations are increasing, especially in the eastern United States and Canada. It appears that birders can hope to encounter the "log-cock" with increasing frequency.

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### ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

The work of Barry van Dusen appears frequently on the cover of *Bird Observer*. He is presently illustrating a pocket laminated guide on butterflies for the Massachusetts Audubon Society. The fifth such guide Barry has worked on, "A Guide to Butterflies and Butterfly Gardening" will portray about sixty species. Another current project for Barry is adding a studio onto his central Massachusetts home.