



The REDHEAD



Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery

Fall 2013

A Special Committee of the Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis

Vol. 7 No. 4

RHWO NEWS

Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers and Red-headed Woodpeckers

The Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery Project field observers at the Cedar Creek Ecology Science Reserve this breeding season have been noticing puzzling interactions between Red-headed Woodpeckers and Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers.

This July, we had a discrepancy in our data. We had a woodpecker nest where, using a nest camera, only a single nestling was visible in the nest, but later it appeared that three fledglings were with the adults. We may never know the explanation. Perhaps the pair “adopted” a fledgling or two. Perhaps the nest camera missed seeing two nestlings. Or perhaps the observation of three fledglings was in error, and in fact juvenile Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers were mistaken for fledgling Red-headed Woodpeckers.

Subsequently, during August, September, and into October, we have been seeing juvenile sapsuckers interact with adult Red-headed Woodpeckers. On several occasions, we saw a juvenile sapsucker approach an adult woodpecker, apparently soliciting food. Invariably the woodpecker would displace the sapsucker, and we never did see an adult Red-headed Woodpecker feed a juvenile sapsucker. (On one occasion a chatter call from a cluster of oaks near a nest attracted both adult Red-headed Woodpeckers, who had been feeding nestlings. Active chattering ensued by both adults in the trees, but leaves obscured the interactions, and a juvenile sapsucker was photographed minutes later within the oaks after the adults had left.)

Sapsuckers are noticeably smaller than Red-headed Woodpeckers. However, the plumage of juvenile sapsuckers and juvenile Red-headed Woodpeckers is somewhat similar. Both are mostly brown with disruptive lighter markings. Juvenile Red-headed Woodpeckers have a large white area on the wings and back, and juvenile sapsuckers have a white area visible from the side.

When we would glimpse a brown “woodpecker” of about the right size near an adult Red-headed Woodpecker, we assumed that it was a fledgling Red-headed Woodpecker. On occasion, the brown juvenile in question was a sapsucker, as evident in photographs.

It is not at all clear what the sapsuckers were trying to do. We have seen adult Red-headed Woodpeckers displace Red-bellied, Downy, and Hairy Woodpeckers, White-breasted Nuthatches, and Blue Jays from near their nest or

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A Note from the Chair

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Fall 2013

This year’s survey activity is completed and we are beginning to look over our results to see what we have learned about our favorite bird. The addition of cavity cameras has been quite a boon. We now have firm data on behavior that previously we could only guess at. With 83 (as of 10/23/2013) birds now banded, and a good return from last year’s banding, we know that some of these returning birds were either born or banded at Cedar Creek. Their return verifies what ornithologists call *site fidelity*—information has never been documented before in the scientific community. The cavity cameras also revealed the average clutch size (eggs laid) is between four and five eggs. Previously, because the size of most nest cavities is so small, we assumed birds were only laying two or three eggs per nest. The camera clearly revealed otherwise. Pat Hartman and Al Watchuka deserve our thanks for their perseverance and great spirited work with the cavity camera. Thanks also to Siah St. Clair for his excellent photographic work which documented the types of food adults feed young—particularly the importance of beetles, grasshoppers, and other insects during the summer months. Our next issue of *The Redhead* will detail more of our findings, but we already know that we have uncovered invaluable information on RHWO that no one else has discovered.

During the winter months we will be submitting grants to a number of different birding organizations to help fund two field technicians during the bulk of next year’s breeding season. We are also excited about new opportunities to work with Sherburne NWR, the Belwin Conservancy, the Minnesota Valley NWR, Nerstrand Big Woods State Park, and Camp Ripley National Guard Training Center to improve their oak savanna habitat for RHWO. October will be our last regular meeting of the year, but we will be busy studying data and pulling funds together for next year’s program. Our treasury has been sorely depleted by this year’s activity, so if you have not yet renewed your membership, please get in touch with our treasurer Jerry Bahls and renew now.

Chet Meyers, Chair

Did you know? Eve, the first red-headed woodpecker (RHWO) banded (Summer 2011) at Cedar Creek, outlived her first 2012 mate, Adam. Adam was hit by a car. Eve soon found a new mate and successfully fledged some young. Eve along with all the RHWO’s left in the Fall of 2012. She did not return in 2013.

Note From the Editor

The feature topic this month was - "**What happens to RHWO's nesting areas when dead trees fall?**" Jim Howitz' article "*A Brief History of Red-headed Woodpeckers at Cedar Creek*" describes how the woodpeckers moved around in the area over the period 1976 until the present. I think we can assume that a similar movement occurred elsewhere in the state and Midwest. It also partly explains why they disappear from some areas.

This month's news article describes an apparent interaction between a yellow-bellied sapsucker and a red-headed woodpecker. These are a very interesting observations and will merit more scrutiny next year.

Please continue to send your pictures and RHWO sightings. I hope to put them on a map for you all to see where they've been seen and fed.

- Jerry Bahls, Editor

"Sapsuckers", Continued from page 1

a feeder. These birds are common in the areas at Cedar Creek where the Red-headed Woodpeckers nest, and we have seen interactions between Red-headed Woodpeckers and them many times. The aggressive reactions of the adult Red-headed Woodpeckers to the sapsuckers are no surprise.

However, sapsuckers at Cedar Creek are uncommon. Fewer than ten sapsucker nests at Cedar Creek have ever been reported. They typically nest in aspen groves and we have found none of them nesting in the Red-headed Woodpecker areas. In a typical year, I might see a sapsucker two or three times at Cedar Creek. Late this summer and early fall we were seeing juvenile sapsuckers nearly every day in different locations. We have not noticed any sapsucker wells (holes to allow sap to run).

The literature appears not to mention any interactions between Red-headed Woodpeckers and sapsuckers, though many species of bird are recorded using sapsucker wells. We would appreciate reports of any observations of Red-headed Woodpeckers and sapsuckers that might help us unravel this mystery.

Jim Howitz

A Brief History of Red-headed Woodpeckers at Cedar Creek

The highest concentration of nesting Red-headed Woodpeckers (RHWO) in Minnesota occurs at the Cedar Creek Ecosystems Science Reserve in northern Anoka County.

There were about 60 breeding pairs in 2012 and 31 pairs in 2013 near the southeast corner of Cedar Creek. Even more impressive, we reported 56 RHWOs on the 2011 Christmas Count, vastly more than any other count in the region. (However, all of the woodpeckers left and none were present for the 2012 Christmas Count.) The Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery (RhWR) project would dearly love to have many such areas elsewhere in Minnesota and adjacent states. So we have been trying to determine what makes Cedar Creek so attractive to the birds.

All RHWO nests at Cedar Creek in the last several years have been in or adjacent to areas subjected to prescribed burns. Periodic prescribed burns were begun in 1964 with the aim of re-establishing oak savannah habitat and without any thought about RHWOs. Such burns appear critical for maintenance of the high breeding population at Cedar Creek. There is a positive correlation between nest density and burn frequency.

The distribution of RHWOs at Cedar Creek has changed over the years. I first visited Cedar Creek in summer 1975 and paid little attention to the woodpeckers I saw because I was studying Black-capped Chickadees. However, I kept notes of the other bird species I encountered and have tried to reconstruct a "history" of RHWOs at Cedar Creek.

Prior to its acquisition by the University of Minnesota and Minnesota Academy of Sciences beginning in the 1930s, Cedar Creek consisted mostly of woodlands, marshes, bogs, and farmsteads. According to the real old-timers I talked to, RHWOs were common on the farms. They nested in scattered trees, caught flying insects, and fed on acorns and corn. Evidently, RHWOs were present at Cedar Creek before the regimen of prescribed burns was started. I first noticed them at Cedar Creek in "savannah" habitat in the abandoned farmstead near the intersection of Anoka County Roads 24 and 26 and the Peterson farm at County Road 24 and East Bethel Boulevard. It is likely that no more than three pairs were in each of these areas. I never saw any RHWOs in these areas after 1988. These areas look like reasonable RHWO habitat today, but lack sufficient dead trees to attract the birds.

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Red-headed woodpecker with carrion beetle. One of many photos taken by Siah St. Clair at Cedar Creek. See his blog <http://www.allofnature.blogspot.com>

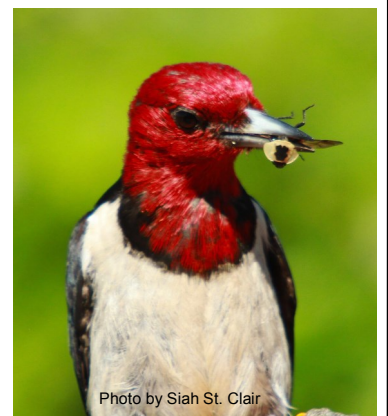
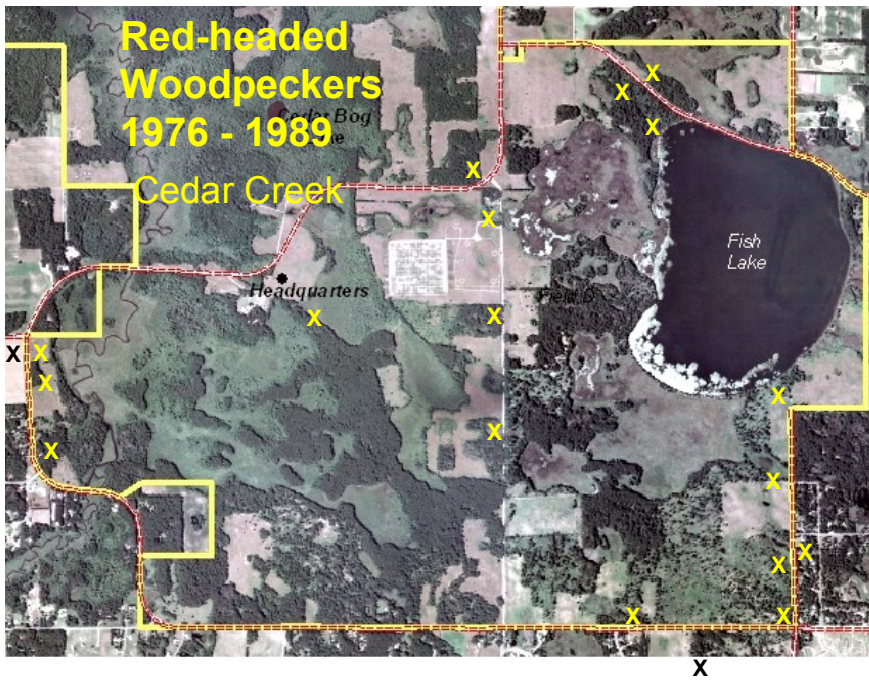


Photo by Siah St. Clair

A third area with perhaps several pairs was northwest of Fish Lake along both sides of County Road 76. They nested in the aspens and birches along the marshes and in the oaks south of the road. These woods have been on a ten-year burn cycle. Apparently, this has not been often enough to open the woods to the liking of the woodpeckers. This is now a closed canopy woods and to my eye totally unsuitable for RHWOs. These woods are scheduled to be burned in spring 2014. We will see if the birds use it in the years after the burn. The disappearance of RUWOs from this area suggests that frequent burns are needed to maintain suitable habitat.



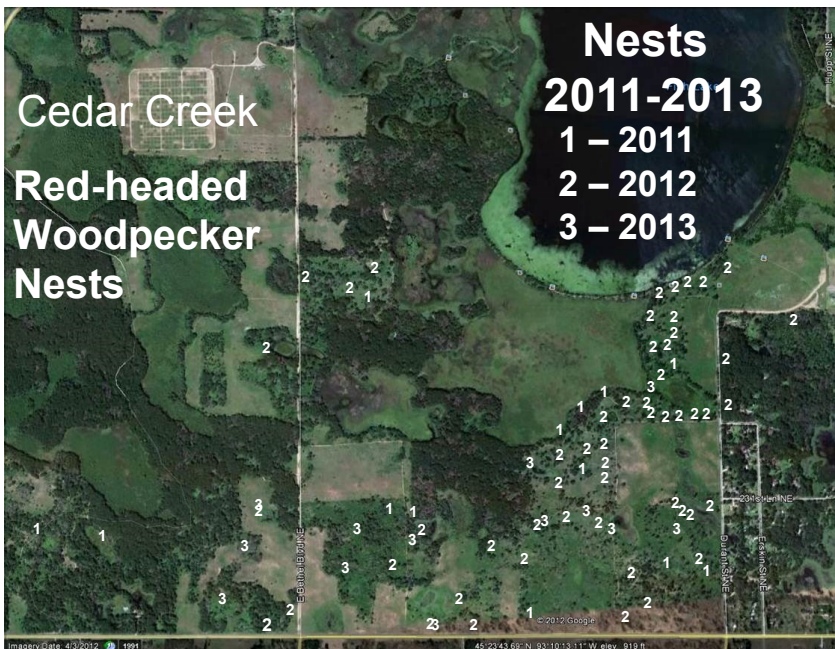
By 1978 I noticed RHWOs west of Durant Street, in what is now the most concentrated nesting area. By 1989 the pattern of occupancy we see today was established. There were nesting pairs south of Fish Lake, west of 233rd Street, and along Durant Street.

Burn compartment 409 along County Road 26 was left unburned as a control until about 1998. For the first few years after it was burned the woodpeckers nested in aspens that had been damaged or killed by the fires. Nearly all the aspens there are gone now, and the woodpeckers nest in trees with harder wood.

A satellite group of one to three pairs of RHWOs has been nesting in the savannah known as Field D for several years. This area is about half a mile northwest of the main RHWO breeding area. A second such group has been nesting in the Davis plots about a mile west of the main area.

annually (weather permitting). Four pairs of woodpeckers nested in these areas in 2012 and three pairs in 2012. With oak wilt and burning in most years, the breeding habitat of RHWOs west of East Bethel Boulevard should improve and we expect that many pairs will nest there. All of the areas at Cedar Creek where Red-headed Woodpeckers (RHWO) have been breeding in recent years are still suitable habitat. Eventually, the burning will eliminate the large northern pin oaks in some compartments, and the woodpeckers may need to move elsewhere. Burn compartments 105 and 108 have abundant regrowth of hazelnut and sapling northern pin oaks, other bushes, and vines. Although RHWOs breed in these areas, the habitat is probably not optimal. The birds breed in all of the burned savannahs at Cedar Creek, despite obvious differences in the density of live trees, dead trees, and ground cover. They do not breed in the adjacent Allison Savanna, though I found nests there in 1988 and 1989.

Since 2006 areas along the west side of East Bethel Boulevard have been burned annually (weather permitting). Four pairs of woodpeckers nested in these areas in 2012 and three pairs in 2012. With oak wilt and burning in most years, the breeding habitat of RHWOs west of East Bethel Boulevard should improve and we expect that many pairs will nest there. All of the areas at Cedar Creek where Red-headed Woodpeckers (RHWO) have been breeding in recent years are still suitable habitat. Eventually, the burning will eliminate the large northern pin oaks in some compartments, and the woodpeckers may need to move elsewhere. Burn compartments 105 and 108 have abundant regrowth of hazelnut and sapling northern pin oaks, other bushes, and vines. Although RHWOs breed in these areas, the habitat is probably not optimal. The birds breed in all of the burned savannahs at Cedar Creek, despite obvious differences in the density of live trees, dead trees, and ground cover. They do not breed in the adjacent Allison Savanna, though I found nests there in 1988 and 1989.



Red-headed Woodpeckers at Cedar Creek appear to have nested in farmsteads decades ago, and then shifted to fire-maintained savannah where they now nest exclusively.

For the past two breeding seasons, RHWOs that were breeding at Cedar Creek for the first time did so exclusively in areas that had just been burned within a few weeks. It appears that the birds are attracted to the open blackened ground with scattered live and dead trees. If the Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery (RhWR) project attempts to attract woodpeckers to new areas, controlled burning may prove crucial.



Photo by Heather Keena

Spring Issue Feature Topic

The Spring issue's topic will be - "What were some of the 2013 nesting and fledging results?" Send your observations and references to Jerry Bahls (rhwracm@comcast.net) by January 15th. Also send any future topics to be featured in the newsletter.

Next RhWR Meetings

The RhWR usually meets on the 3rd Wednesday each month at 7:00 pm at the Lund's Store 1 block west of 50th & France in Edina. However, the next meeting will probably be in February 2014. All are welcome and encouraged to attend. Please encourage your friends to attend also. Check our website at (www.RedheadRecovery.org) for current information.

Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery
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Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery Program Membership Application

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I'd like to renew! Renew my RhWR membership for \$10/year.

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