



# The REDHEAD



## Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery

Fall 2008

A Special Committee of the Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis

Vol. 2 No. 4

### Note From the Editor

### A Note from the Chair

#### Membership Dues

The Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery (RhWR) receives almost all of its revenue from its membership dues. The RhWR will increase its dues for new memberships immediately. The dues will increase to \$10/yr. New members will receive a packet, which will include the new RhWR button and sew-on patch as well as the latest "The REDHEAD". Because we have decided to establish our membership year as July 1 - June 30 (all memberships will expire on June 30 of the year the membership was established), all new memberships established from now until June 30, 2010 will expire on June 30, 2010. Renewals will remain at \$5/year, but will expire on June 30 of the period of renewal. Look for future announcements regarding lifetime memberships and renewal dues.

New memberships and renewals can be made by sending your name, address and e-mail address or fill in the membership application form on the last page of this newsletter to the address below. Please make check payable to Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis RhWR.

Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis  
RhWR  
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Thank you for your continued support.

Since our last issue of "The REDHEAD" our group completed some final wrap-up work on this year's Cedar Creek Project. In September and October we collected data on nest trees discovered during our spring surveys. Eighteen (18) active nests were found, and it looks like the recent fledglings have done well. Our special thanks to Jeff Corney at Cedar Creek and to Liz Harper of the MN DNR and her tireless colleagues who put in hours of work trudging through the brush locating trees and then collecting data on each tree. All nest trees have been marked with metal tags and recorded with GPS readings so it will be interesting to see which of these nests are used again by the woodpecker families next spring.

What did we discover? Eleven (11) of the eighteen (18) nests were either in dead trees or dead limbs of living trees. Most nest cavities had no preferred compass bearing, but did face the predominant summer foraging area. Cavities also tended to be relatively high up in living trees. Most interesting was that all 18 nests were found in a very limited area, in only three of the seven areas surveyed. Four large survey areas, that were savanna-like, had no woodpecker nests present. The great mystery is why no active nests were found in Helen Allison SNA right across the road from one of our largest groups of RHWO nests.

In 2009, we will ramp up our efforts to locate other clusters of RHWO throughout the state. Presently we know of only three viable clusters with more than one nesting pair. There are a number of single nests scattered especially throughout SW Minnesota. But we are confident there are other groupings of RHWO yet to be discovered. Here's where birders can be a big help. See our website <[www.redheadrecovery.org](http://www.redheadrecovery.org)> for details on cluster identification.

And "Yes!" Both our *Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery* buttons and sew-on patches are available and quite handsome. Look for them at local birding events and future Audubon meetings.

- Chet Meyers

#### Woodpeckers Aid Decomposition

A study in the journal *Condor* (2004) by the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and Arkansas State University suggests that a woodpecker's beak contains many fungal spores that play a key role in the decay of "snags." These fungi serve a critical role in the decomposition of dead trees and influence how they are used by wildlife. Without adequate decay, woodpeckers are unable to excavate nest cavities - vital components of forests that serve as nesting sites to a variety of wildlife.

For more information go to <http://www.newswise.com/articles/view/503171/>.

#### Articles Wanted

The editor would like articles for "The REDHEAD" sent to [RhWRACM@comcast.net](mailto:RhWRACM@comcast.net). Articles may be edited for clarity and size.

## Snags in the Home Habitat

Snags are a precious commodity in developed areas and are usually totally lacking in the home habitat. Many species benefit from the presence of snags, but, none more than woodpeckers and the other cavity nesters who use old woodpecker holes. Adding a snag to your yard is well worth the minimal effort.

Small snags can readily be found by contacting sellers of firewood or those involved in clearing land for development. Unless you require delivery of the snag, it will probably be free. It should be around 7' long to attract woodpeckers. Anything longer would be too heavy to handle unless it were of very small diameter. A snag, since it is already dead and decaying, will not be a permanent addition to your yard. It will likely last from 4 to 10 years, and, will have to be periodically replaced.

A very easy way to install a snag is simply to set it in place and wire it to a post. Thus, the only preliminary work involved is to set a single post. The post will be a permanent addition to your yard and should be a locust or cedar fence post at least 7' long. It should be sunk in the ground 2½' to 3', depending on your soil, or, even better, sunk in concrete. This post will outlast many snags, so, in loose soil, it is well worth a bag of cement.

Before placing your snag, make sure its base is cut square so the snag will stand erect. Ideally, the snag should stand on its own without exerting any pull or push on the post before wiring. Resting the snag on cement blocks rather than directly on the ground may greatly lengthen its life. Also, tacking a roof board on any upward facing cavities at the top will prevent rain water from entering the decayed center of the log.

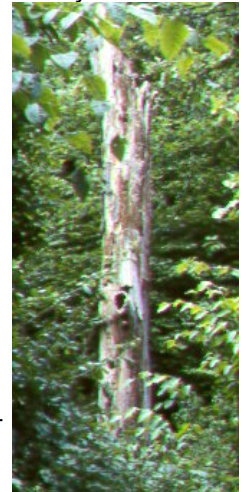
If the post is set when you bring your snag home, the snag can be lowered into position from the truck bed, making it much easier to lift the top than if it were laying flat on the ground. Heavy snags must be handled with care, since they can break or twist suddenly under the stress of being lifted on end. The safest method for handling heavy snags is to find a friend with a front end loader.

Once in position, the only maintenance your snag should require is occasional tightening or replacing of the rusting wire. If you use a short piece of cable instead of wire, you will have zero maintenance. Our yard snag is a seven foot section of shagbark hickory wired to a salvaged 4x4 post. It was put in place in the fall of 1992 as an addition to one of our feeding areas. Many 1" holes were drilled to serve as suet and peanut butter feeders. These eventually began to attract starlings and were discontinued in favor of conventional suet feeder designs to discourage starlings. In early spring, the feeders were moved well away from the snag in order to reduce traffic in its vicinity.

To our great pleasure, a pair of red-bellied woodpeckers began to frequent the snag and eventually excavate a nesting cavity. Oddly, the female did most, if not all, of the excavating, but, the male frequently visited, and even entered the cavity when it was large enough. However, the woodpeckers suddenly ceased to visit the snag, and, subsequently, were found to be nesting 400' away in a tall snag. Perhaps the male was excavating his own hole while the female was busy at the yard snag. Woodpeckers frequently make several excavations before choosing one for their nest, a habit that should be greatly appreciated by secondary cavity nesters.

In early May, when the woodpeckers lost interest in the snag, a few starlings began to inspect their not quite completed cavity with the idea of nesting. All of the interested starlings were either discouraged or shot, and, by late May, showed no further interest in nesting there.

In late June, a pair of bluebirds moved into the woodpecker hole, laid three eggs, and successfully fledged all three. The great mass of the snag, no doubt, provided good insulation from the hot July sun. However, an early spring nesting would have put them at the mercy of the starlings. An easy option for protecting a bluebird nest in a woodpecker cavity from starlings is to fit a temporary 1½" entrance hole. A piece of leather belting is ideal for this purpose since it will curve to the surface of the trunk.



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### RhWR Contact Information

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Photo by Ben Wilson

## MAST-PRODUCING TREES

Mast is an important diet component of many wildlife species. Mast is the fruit of a tree or a shrub and is called "hard" (acorns, hickory nuts, walnuts, etc.) or "soft" (fleshy fruits of dogwood, blackgum, black cherry, etc.). Some of the most important trees and shrubs that produce mast in Tennessee are the oaks, dogwoods, hickories, black cherry, blackgum, beech and maples. The oaks are probably the single most important group of trees for mast production for wildlife. For squirrels, bears, wild hogs and to a lesser extent deer, oak mast appears to be the most important factor influencing reproduction. Following years of good mast production, reproduction, survival and population levels of these wildlife species are high.

Conversely, when mast failures occur, reproduction, survival and population levels of these wildlife species decline. Oak mast is also highly utilized by wild turkeys, ruffed grouse, bobwhite quail, raccoons and small rodents. Landowners should strive to maintain a variety of mast-producing trees in their woodlots to insure that food is available the entire year.

If possible, landowners should maintain trees from both the white oak and the red oak families in a forest stand because of differences in their fruiting habits. Acorns on trees in the red oak group mature in two years, while trees in the white oak group produce mature acorns in one season. By having both oak groups represented in a woodlot, there is less chance of a complete mast failure following a late killing frost in the spring. Common species in the white oak group include white oak, post oak and chestnut oak; common species in the red oak group include northern red oak, southern red oak, scarlet oak and black oak.

In addition to the oaks, it is important to plan for a diversity of other mast-producing species in the woodlot. Hickories are used extensively by squirrels and dogwood, black cherry, blackgum and wild grape are good soft mast producers. A scattering or clumps of pine provide good cover for wildlife, particularly in winter, and offer an alternate food source (pine seed). Pine also provides a valuable timber component to the timber stand.

Mast production depends on several factors, including tree species, environmental conditions, tree age and vigor. Landowners can often point out individual trees that are the best mast producers in the woodlot. If you have not observed this in your woodlot, look for some clues when selecting wildlife trees. An abundance of new or old acorns or hickory nut shells under larger trees might indicate the best producers. Temporarily mark these trees and observe their mast production for a few years to see if you are correct in your assessment; then mark the trees permanently as wildlife trees and save them.

The number of mast trees to maintain in a woodlot depends on surrounding conditions and landowner objectives. If wildlife management is the primary objective, more mast trees should be maintained than if the primary objective is timber production. In timber production areas where a complete harvesting system (clear cutting) is used, leave buffer strips along creeks and streams, as well as a few small groups of trees scattered throughout the area. Harvesting timber in smaller tracts (5-40 acres depending on the land base) will maintain adequate mast production. In general, two to three trees (larger than 12 inches DBH) in the white and red oak groups should be left per acre for good mast production for wildlife. Appendix A\* outlines procedures for estimating the "acorn potential" of a woodlot. Reference this section when evaluating your woodlot for mast trees.

In addition to oaks, one or two hickories and soft mast-producing trees, such as blackgum or black cherry, should also be left per acre to maximize use of the area by a variety of wildlife species.

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE  
AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE

\* Appendix A can be found at <http://www.utextension.utk.edu/publications/pbfiles/pb1446.pdf>.

### RHWO Candy?

What is candy to a red-headed woodpecker (RHWO)? One of the goals of the RhWR is to provide a list of RHWO preferred foods to our membership. To assist us in this, we are asking members who have RHWO's regularly coming to their feeders to let us know what they are eating. We would like you to feed one type of food at a time - no mixes. You may put more than one in the feeder at a time but keep them separated and know what is where. This is a list of suggested foods - peanuts (roasted or raw, in-shell or splits), black oil sunflower, striped sunflower, corn (whole or cracked), raisins (or other dried fruit), pecans, almonds or other seeds or nuts that you think they might like. If you would like to participate, send a message to [RhWRACM@comcast.net](mailto:RhWRACM@comcast.net).

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Old yard snags, too rotten to safely house nests or even support their own weight are still useful in the home habitat. When such a snag is retired, it should be placed on its side in a location where you won't need to disturb it. Along with a variety of interesting fungi, the red backed salamander, a terrestrial species, is dependent upon fallen wood and decaying leaves during its entire life cycle.

Another use for the decaying wood of retired snags is to provide inserts for flicker boxes. Our flickers rush to nest-boxes almost as quickly as bluebirds, if they are stuffed with something to excavate. The problem is that starlings can pull out the recommended wood chips as quickly as flickers. However a block of well softened wood sawed from a snag will still attract woodpeckers but starlings cannot use it. My first inserts turned out to be too solid in the center, and the flickers gave up. However, a second try was successful. It is a good idea to cut several blocks for future years and drill into the center to check the degree of rot. Also, there is no need to use a single solid block. Several slabs cut to the

size of the inside of the nestbox can be left in a damp area to further rot before use and then stacked in the nest box. Thoroughly dry the inserts before placing them in the box.

The ultimate backyard deadwood project would be the snag orchard - a cluster of a dozen or so 7' snags. Its value to wildlife may be debatable, but, it would certainly make a dramatic photo and an emphatic statement. Cleaning up after nature has become an American obsession which is definitely of no value to wildlife.

**Next RhWR Meeting**

The RhWR meets on the 2nd Wednesday each month at (7:00 pm) at the Lund's Store 1 block west of 50th & France in Edina. The next meeting is will on January 14, 2009 (No December meeting). All are welcomed and encouraged to attend. Check our website for current information.

Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery  
Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis  
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Minneapolis MN 55403-0801

**Save that Snag!**

Place  
Stamp  
Here



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

*I'd like to join!* Please add me as a member of the Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery (RhWR) at the rate of \$10/year! Please send my membership information to the address below.

*I'd like to renew!* Renew my RhWR membership for \$5/year.

*Yes, I'd like to join Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis also!* Please add me as a member of the Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery and the Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis at the rate of \$18/year. Please send my membership information and *Kingfisher* to the address below.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

E-MAIL \_\_\_\_\_

**Send this application and make check payable to:**  
Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis  
RhWR  
PO Box 3801  
Minneapolis, MN 55403-0801