



The REDHEAD



Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery

Winter 2024

A Special Committee of the Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis

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RHWO NEWS

Red-headed Woodpecker (RHWO) Spring-Fall Cavity Cleaning

In science terminology RHWOs are called primary cavity nesters. That means they excavate their own cavity to nest in. Other animals that use vacant RHWO cavities to nest in are called secondary cavity nesters. If an animal does this when it cannot make its own cavity it is called an obligate secondary cavity nester. Other species of woodpeckers will also use existing RHWO cavities for their nest even though they could make their own cavity - why build a new house when a good second hand one already exists? These birds are called facultative secondary cavity nesters.

RHWOs excavate several cavities within their territories. Some are used to nest or roost during the current year or were used in a previous year. They seem to maintain connection with their cavities, both new and old, though sometimes they are away from some of their cavities for a period of time. That gives an opportunity for secondary nesters to take advantage of a temporarily vacant RHWO cavity. This is a story that happened this past summer with one of these cavities at Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve.

RHWO Nest 247 was vacant this past spring with several active RHWO nests within a few hundred yards. Nest 247 has had a nest camera attached to the tree for a few years, so activity is constantly recorded. In early May a Tree Swallow pair that had nested successfully at this cavity in 2022 returned and started their new nest for 2023. By May 20th their actions at the nest indicated that they had eggs in the nest. On the night of May 23rd a flying squirrel entered the nest at 3:18 AM and appeared to interact with the eggs,

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A Note from the Chair

Winter 2024

- Greetings to everyone as we get started on this new year.
- We here at RhWR are pulling together all that we learned and accomplished this past year. We are also finalizing plans to learn even more aspects of specific Red-headed Woodpecker (RHWO) behaviors and biology in the coming months to help improve the future of Red-headed Woodpeckers.
- Thanks to everyone who has renewed membership and/or made a donation as we move through our fundraising effort for the coming year. These funds directly pay the wages of the research technicians (mostly college students) who are in the field rain or shine, day and night, literally, to gather the information we need to know to help RHWOs.
- As you can see from the articles in this newsletter, we are learning more about RHWOs and what goes on at the cavities they create with every season. In addition to the RHWO's activities, many other animals also interact with the cavities, to nest, find food, and many other ways. The cameras we have placed on RHWO nest cavities at Cedar Creek ESR show that these cavities and nest trees are in high demand and needed as a resource by many animals that live in the oak savanna habitat.
- Thanks everyone, for your funds and for volunteered time. Our dollars and volunteer efforts are making a difference.

Siah St. Clair, Steering Committee Chair

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possibly eating or destroying them. Within a couple of days the Tree Swallows were no longer recorded on this camera

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Note From the Editor

I know it's flogging a dead horse, but we sure could use more volunteers who are willing to help with the communications of the RhWR. An Assistant Editor would help and would be trained to be a future Editor. I know there are scarce few new messages on Facebook, but you can do something about that. Volunteer to be our Facebook Editor! Help us out! It looks like we will be needing field volunteers again this summer, let Tom Beer or me know you are available to donate your time (and maybe a little blood to the mosquitoes).

Enjoy the spring while it lasts and we'll see you in the real spring.

Jerry Bahls, Editor



Roger - Photo by Siah St. Clair



Spooky- Photo by Siah St. Clair

Overwintering Red-headed Woodpeckers

A great many Red-headed Woodpeckers are present at Cedar Creek this fall and winter. The photos [in left column] are of Roger and Spooky, two of the woodpeckers attempting to overwinter at Cedar Creek. Spooky is on her roost tree, which doubles as an acorn storage site. We have suspected for months that the northern pin oaks would produce abundant acorns and that many if not all of the RHWOs at Cedar Creek would attempt to overwinter there. Our annual acorn survey showed that acorn production was massive. The Cedar Creek Bog Christmas Count, on December 17, 2023, reported 86 RHWOs. Last year we had almost no acorns and no overwintering RHWOs.

Based on past years, we have thought that the woodpeckers that overwintered here did little during the day other than eating stored acorns. I have always had my doubts. All the other woodpecker species here spend most of each day foraging for insects and other arthropods. So, I thought that RHWOs likely did some foraging on tree surfaces and perhaps some excavating in search of insects. This fall and winter, we have seen the woodpeckers doing very little other than occasionally eating a piece of an acorn. They spent up to 16 hours each day in their roosts, going to roost before sunset and leaving the roost after sunrise. Again they did little during the day as was observed in previous years.

This year and 2019 were excellent acorn production years and many RHWOs overwintered at Cedar Creek. In these two years, RHWOs went to roost earlier relative to sunset than in years when fewer acorns were produced.

The RHWOs have been so inactive that we had difficulty finding them for the Cedar Creek Christmas Count. From roost surveys, we knew that there were over 100 RHWOs at Cedar Creek. But we could not find some of the birds because they were not moving or vocalizing. On previous Christmas Counts, we had little problem finding the RHWOs we knew were there.

The Cedar Creek Christmas Count recorded a record 604 Blue Jays, reflecting a strong correlation with the number of RHWOs on the count. Presumably, this reflects the acorn crop. Why RHWo overwintering numbers should depend on acorn availability is clear. In fall and winter, they eat acorns

they stored earlier in late summer or early fall. Why Blue Jay overwintering numbers should depend on acorn availability is less clear. There are always plenty of Blue Jays here in winter. In years of acorn abundance, there may be more of them.

In past years, over 80% of the RHWOs present in the fall were present in the breeding population the following spring. So, we expect plenty of birds to study in 2024.

Jim Howitz

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and had apparently left the area.

On May 31st a pair of Eastern Bluebirds were present at the now vacant nest cavity, and excitedly sang and “talked” on the videos about this possibly being a place to set up a nest. Over the next several days they removed portions of the Tree Swallow nest material and brought in new nest material until it was just right. Then they appeared to be laying eggs once they had finished nest building and several days went by. There was a lot a Bluebird singing on the videos during those days. On June 11, at 11:57 PM, the flying squirrel showed up and again interacted with what were apparently new eggs in the same way as with the Tree Swallow nest. And within a couple of days the Bluebirds stopped singing and were no longer recorded by the nest camera as being present. Both Tree Swallow and Bluebird obligate secondary cavity nests failed at this cavity this year, probably due to the flying squirrel.



About a dozen other animal species are recorded at the

cavity during the summer, including a garter snake, but they are another story. This story now fast forwards and is about the adult RHWO that begins caching acorns in this tree in September for use as winter food. In the pictures just above the RHWO in the bark are some cached acorns. It also plans to use the cavity as its winter roost. On October 5th it takes a



break from caching acorns to consider the condition of the cavity. The RHWO finds that it has been substantially remodeled over the summer which makes the cavity unsuitable to use as a woodpecker roost. The RHWO gets to work and removes the Bluebird nest and then the Tree Swallow nest and whatever else other summer tenants have left behind. Finally, after considerable work, the cavity is ready for the Woodpecker to use for the winter.

RHWO cavities are in high demand for use by other animals year-round, and there are constant changes in use by different animals from day to night and from week to week.





Next RhWR Steering Committee

The RhWR Steering Committee usually meets on the 3rd Wednesday of the month at 7:00 pm every 3 months. The next *virtual* meeting will be on February 21, 2024 at 7:00 pm. If you would like to participate, please contact Siah St. Clair to be added to the call list. All are welcome and encouraged to attend. Please encourage friends to attend also.

Important Dates

Great Backyard Bird Count Feb 16 - 19, 2024
ACM Board Meeting Feb 19, 2024
Steering Committee Meeting Feb 21, 2024

ALL meetings are *virtual* until further notice.

Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery
Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis
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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 \$20/year (\$50 is suggested rate)! Please send my membership information to the address at right.

I'd like to renew! Renew my RhWR membership for \$20/year (\$50 is suggested rate).

Yes, I'd like to join Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis also! Please add me as a member of the Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery (\$20, \$50 suggested) and the Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis (\$20) at the rate of \$40/year. Please send my membership information to the address at right.

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Send this application and make check payable to:

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