

Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery Project

The red-headed woodpecker (RHWO) is a strikingly colored bird of the Midwest. Sadly, its numbers have dropped by over 60% in the past 50 years, mostly due to the destruction of oak savanna by suburban housing and intensive agriculture. Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery was formed in 2007. Our goal is to reverse the decline and encourage the recovery of this bird through the creation, preservation, and restoration of habitat. We accomplish this through research and public education, and by working with state parks, national wildlife refuges, and private landowners, and encouraging them to develop new and to improve present savanna habitat.



Red-headed Woodpecker



Red-bellied Woodpecker

Red-headed woodpeckers are feisty vocal birds during the early breeding season. Males and females are identical with striking red, black, and white color patterns. This clearly separates them from the 'poorly-named' red-bellied woodpecker shown above. In central Minnesota red-headed woodpeckers are generally habitat specialists that prefer an oak savanna-type landscape. Savanna is characterized by a large open, prairie-like understory with scattered clusters of trees, primarily oaks, whose thick bark tolerates fire. An open understory facilitates the bird's habit of swooping down from a perch to capture grasshoppers, dragonflies, and other insects during spring and summer months.

Periodic fire is important because it reduces the spread of shrubs in which insects find safe haven. Another significant ingredient of red-headed woodpecker habitat is the presence of large dead trees, or 'snags', with limbs large enough to accommodate cavities for nesting, roosting, and food-caching activities. We have been surprised by finding nest cavities in limbs only 10 inches in diameter. The cavities are so narrow that once young birds hatch and grow to juvenile size, they actually have to 'stack' on top of each other to secure food and space. This may explain why, with a normal clutch size of 4-5 eggs, only 2 or 3 birds succeed in fledging.



Through a joint eleven-year research project with the University of Minnesota's Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve and the Minnesota DNR we have learned that red-headed woodpeckers:

- * are cavity nesters, with an average cavity height of a little over 26 feet
- * return to the same delimited area after wintering elsewhere. In 2013 and in 2014, 34% and 70% of returning birds, had been previously banded.
- * eat a wide variety of insects, berries, and grubs in spring and summer, and acorns in the fall and winter
- * are fairly tolerant of human presence. Will come to feeders with sunflower seeds and suet. Sometimes they even follow our researchers, looking for a handout.
- * are most productive, as a species, in oak savanna habitat that is regularly burned



Where Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery project is working to expand existing habitat

Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve (CCESR)
Sherburne National Wildlife Reserve
Camp Ripley National Guard installation
Nerstrand Big Woods State Park
The Belwin Conservancy
Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge
St. Croix State Park
Selected golf courses

What you can do

Enjoy the bird. Visit the Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve (CCESR) in East Bethel. While this is private Uni. of Minnesota land, there is a nature trail open to the public with nesting RHWO present.

Become aware of, and an advocate for, oak savanna habitat and dead trees, "*Save that snag!*"

Report presence a nesting pair of RHWO on our "Contact RhWR" page on our website <https://redheadwoodpeckerrecovery.org/new/>

Join **Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery** and contribute to our research and public education efforts. \$20 (suggested \$50) yearly membership. Mail to: Red-head Woodpecker Recovery, P.O. Box 32172, Minneapolis, MN 55432-9998