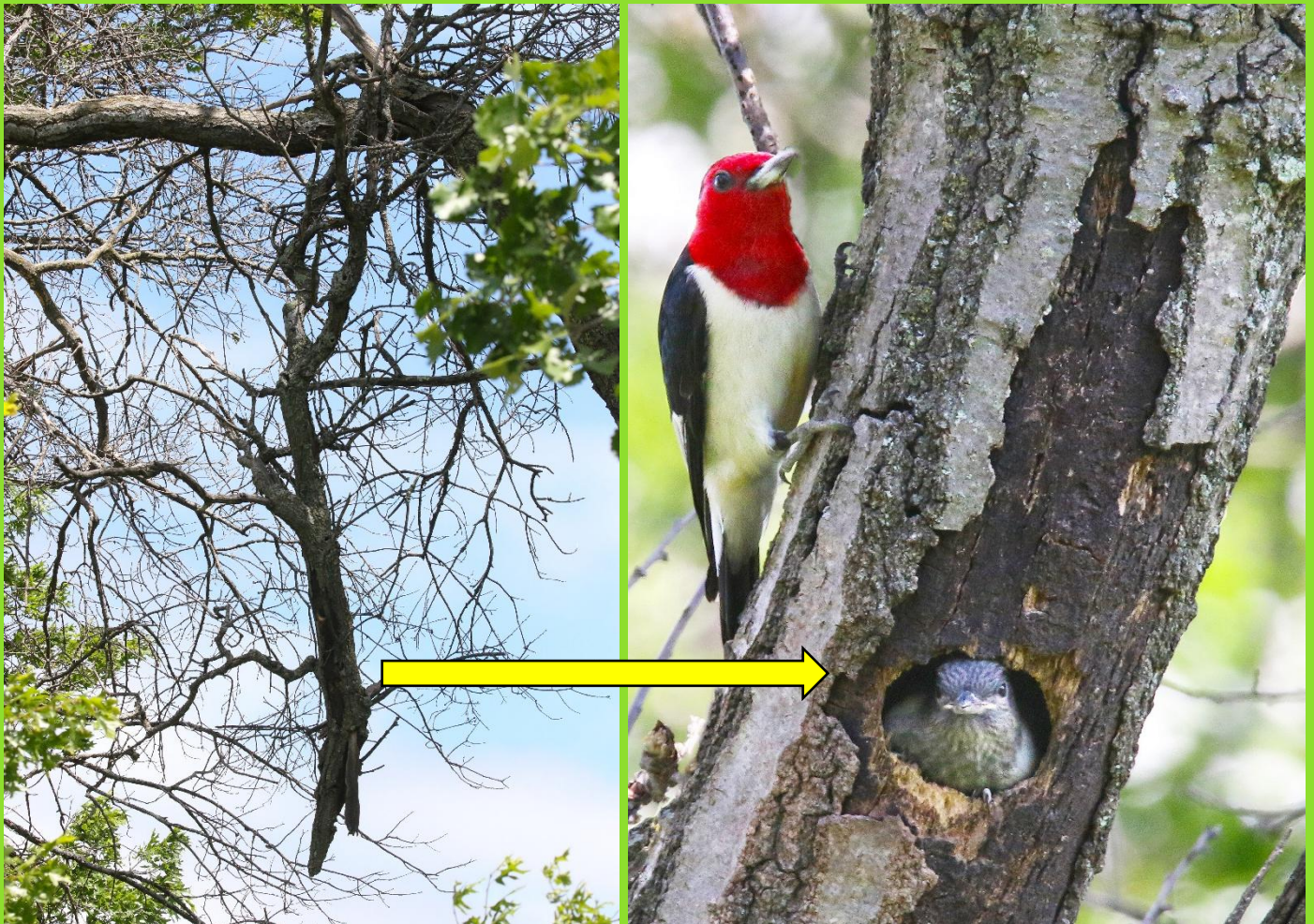


Red-headed Woodpeckers Use Widowmakers as Nest and Roost Sites

Large Widowmakers Make Both a Safe and Perilous Nest and Roost Site





The Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery project (RhWR) was organized in 2007 and is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt non-profit organization.

Investigation and research activities about Red-headed Woodpeckers (RHWOs) at Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve began in 2008 when Cedar Creek ESR gave a permit to the RhWR to initiate those activities on site. The RhWR has continued investigation and research activities since 2008 both at Cedar Creek ESR and at other locations.

Field observation efforts for included information occurred between 2012 and 2025 in all 12 months of the year, with a combined 2,563 days and 15,438 hours by Siah St. Clair and work partner Jim Howitz. All observations were made during a succession of RHWO study and research projects. Many activities required extensive experience and expertise as well as special permits and permissions.

By conducting these observation activities new natural history behaviors of RHWOs have been documented and will be used to help reduce the decline of this species and other species impacted by the presence of RHWOs.

Unless otherwise noted, the information and photographs provided herein are based solely on observations by Siah L St. Clair, a volunteer of the Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery project.

Red-headed Woodpeckers Use Large Widowmakers as Nest and Roost Locations

Large widowmakers make both a safe and perilous nest and roost site

Text and Photography by Siah L St. Clair

A **widowmaker** is a broken off top of a tree or large tree branch that, while falling, has become tangled with lower branches, is suspended up in the tree branches, and can fall at any time without warning. They may last for a couple of minutes or a couple of years. Widowmakers often sway considerably in the slightest breeze and are generally not looked at as places to find nests of any bird or mammal species. But some Red-headed Woodpeckers successfully use these dangerous places for a nest and a roost.

What follows are pictures and examples of nests and a roost in widowmakers.

Cedar Creek ESR Widowmaker: On June 9, 2024, while searching for the location of a nest tree for a pair of RHWOs that had been seen in a specific area more than once, I and volunteer Jean Johnson observed one of the woodpeckers fly onto a large dead tree near us. To our startled surprise, the woodpecker then flew onto a very large pin oak tree widowmaker hanging between two dead trees and entered a cavity hole. A few seconds later the woodpecker emerged from the nest hole and flew away. The bottom of the widowmaker was swaying 10-15 feet back and forth in a gentle breeze. It took a few minutes to grasp that this nest was actually in this very unusual and seemingly dangerous location. The adults were returning to feed nestlings regularly, confirming that this was an actual active nest site.



The far-left picture shows the whole widowmaker with the location of the nest cavity pointed out by the arrow. The small dead branches holding it in place can be seen. The near left picture shows one of the adult woodpeckers at the cavity (see arrow) feeding nestlings as the whole widowmaker sways back and forth in the wind.

I had seen and helped find hundreds of Red-headed Woodpecker nests but never one in a widow-maker and had never considered it as a possibility. On the one hand it seemed safe from usual predators like Bull Snakes and Raccoons, but, to me, it seemed very perilous for nesting success. The tiny branches that were holding it in place in a tangled mess at the top seemed like they would break at any moment. The bottom of the widow-maker was 15-18 feet above the ground. It was obvious that any strong wind would break it loose, and it would crash down.

I watched as the adults brought insect food to the nest every few minutes, entered the nest, and then left. I estimated that the nestlings were a week or so old since the adults had to enter the nest to feed them. I thought it would be about three weeks before the nestlings would be ready to fledge.

I was able to get some photos on this day of discovery. I stayed a good distance away to not upset the adults. It was a very overcast day and not good for photography. The birds were difficult to keep in focus as the widow-maker was constantly swaying in a large arc towards me and then away.



The adults were bringing small to medium sized insects to the nest every few minutes, going all the way into the nest to feed, indicating that the nestlings were small but not hatchlings.

While widowmakers seem unsafe to us, Red-headed Woodpeckers nest primarily in significantly decayed dead trees and the trees they nest in may fall or break apart at any time. Of 28 nest trees where I placed cameras at nests, 75% (21) fell within 6 years, 14% (4) fell within 6 months. Red-headed Woodpeckers already nest in high-risk housing. And however predators like Bull Snakes and Raccoons figure out where a Red-headed Woodpecker nest is they need a tree trunk to climb to get up to the nest. Searching a labyrinth of interconnected branches high in the trunks of different trees is probably not in their genetic behavior codes as a high yield method to find and capture prey. Widowmakers may be excellent nest locations.

I returned to this nest on June 26, 17 days later. It was a sunny day, good for photography, and I expected the nestlings might be showing themselves. The adults were very busy feeding and not disturbed by my presence. The nestlings were loud and leaning far out of the nest hole, something they usually do 24-48 hours prior to fledging



Because the widow-maker was swaying so much the adults would land a bit away from the nest tree and get their bearings before moving to feed the nestlings. The nestlings would be hanging half out of the nest hole while the adults became adjusted to the sway. It is rare to have the nestling half out of the hole while the adult is on the nest tree at the same time, resulting in some good photo opportunities because of the widow-maker. (Nestlings usually retreat back into the nest hole as adults approach.)

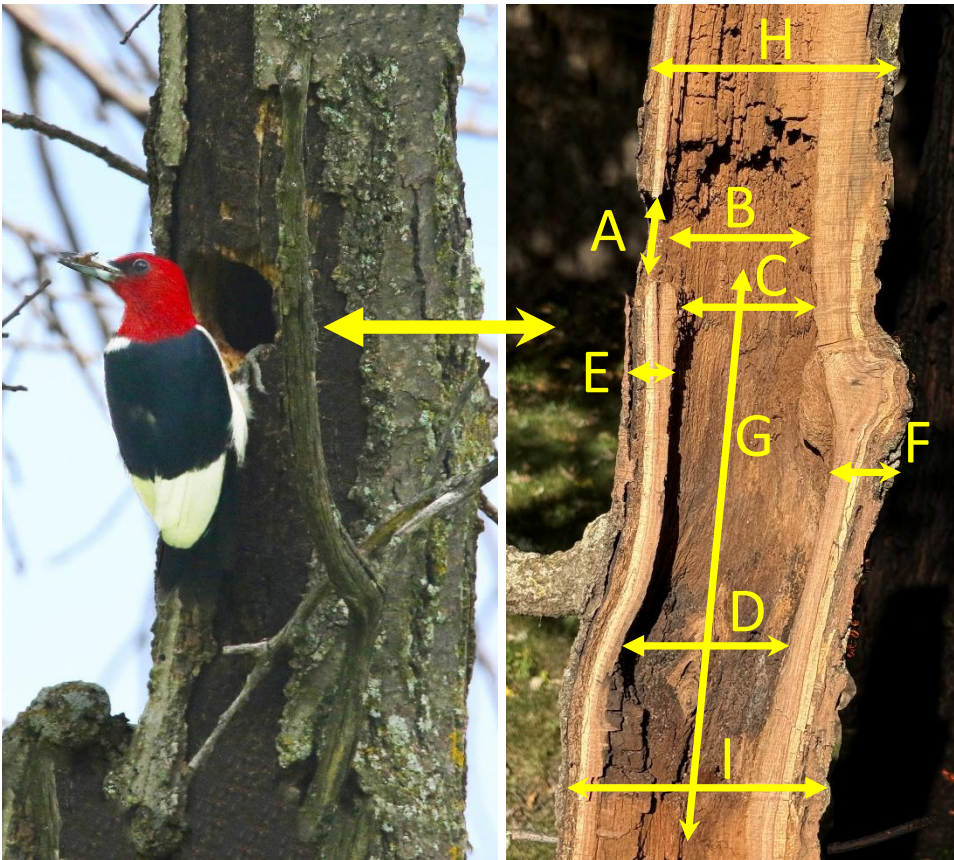




Work partner Jim Howitz and I returned 4 days later, on June 30, and found that the nestlings had fledged. After about an hour of searching we found 2 fledglings high in the live oak trees near the nest. The fledglings were still hiding in the small leafy branches, and the parents were bringing food to them. This is the behavior of fledglings that have only been out of the nest for a day or two. There may have been more than two fledglings, but that is all we could find in the time we had on this day. The adults were flying back to the trees next to the widow-maker while searching for food. Pictures below are highly cropped, lightened, and focus is poor in very dark treetops. Fledgling is on the left in picture #1 and being fed in picture #2. Note the very unusual lack of black markings on the secondaries of this fledgling.



Nine weeks after the RHWO nestlings fledged, on August 26, the widow-maker fell in a heavy windstorm. It smashed into several pieces, giving a reminder of how lucky this RHWO family was that there were no similar storms during their nesting cycle, which on average lasts around 46 days. I searched through the wreckage of the widowmaker and was surprised to find about 18 inches of the nest cavity still intact. I retrieved it for measuring and photography purposes. See below.



Cavity Dimensions:

A smaller than normal cavity, the dimensions for this widowmaker nest cavity are as follows:

- A. Hole 1.75" H, 2" W
- B. Inside hole space 2.63"
- C. Inside width high 2.75"
- D. Inside width low 3.5"
- E. Front wall width 0.88"
- F. Back wall width 1"
- G. Cavity depth 9.5"
- H. Outside diameter 5"
- I. Outside diameter 5.5"

This narrow cavity had all of the soft heartwood completely removed. There was barely room for an adult to move around to incubate and for nestlings to maneuver for food.

Closing for Widowmaker Nest at Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve:

This pair of Red-headed Woodpeckers chose an unlikely place for their nest, and it worked for them with at least two successful fledglings. The following year they returned and had a more "normal" nest in a nearby dead tree.



Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve Red-headed Woodpecker Widowmaker Nestling 6-26-24.

Widowmakers as Red-headed Woodpecker Nests at Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge:

After finding and documenting the widowmaker nest at Cedar Creek ESR in 2024 I thought it had been wonderful to witness something that was very rare and possibly unique. But then I visited Richie Swanson at Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge (TNWR), just off the Mississippi River in Wisconsin, across the river from Winona, Minnesota. This NWR is 160 miles southeast of Cedar Creek ESR. Richie Swanson is a Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery Project volunteer and had been studying the Red-headed Woodpeckers at Trempealeau NWR for 5 years. He had a wealth of information.

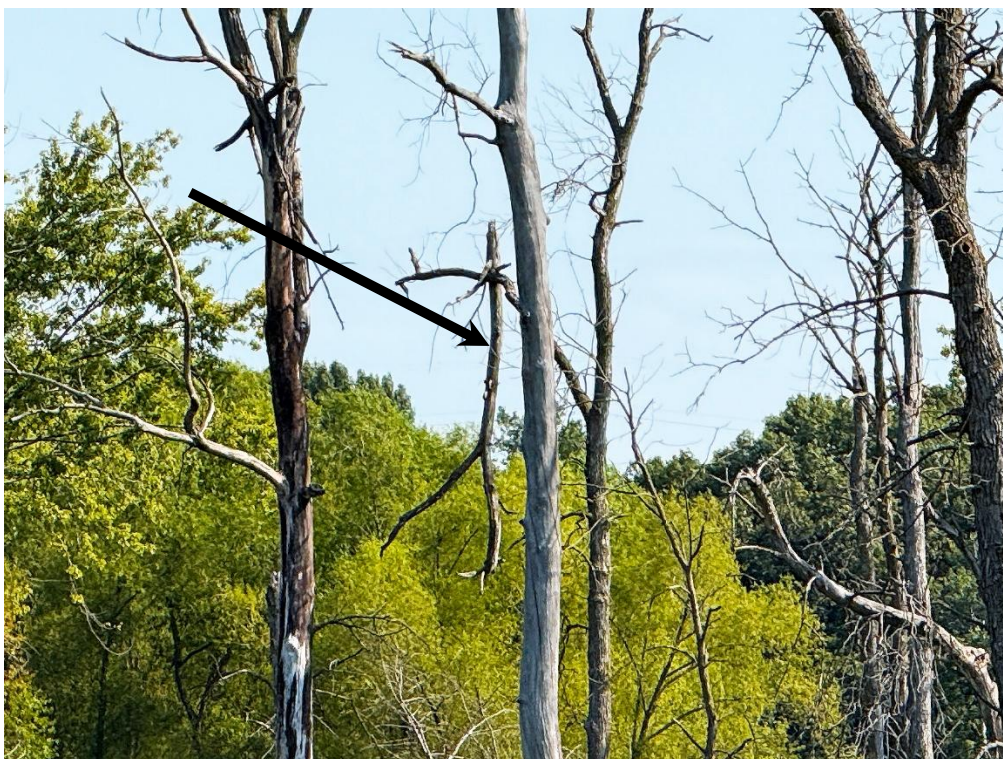
Richie took me on a tour of the Red-headed Woodpecker (RHWO) nesting areas at Trempealeau NWR on September 8th, 2025. Most of the RHWO nesting habitat at TNWR is in floodplain wetland sloughs, very different than the oak savanna habitat at Cedar Creek ESR. We had to postpone our visit for several weeks because the Mississippi River had risen and flooded many of the roads we needed to travel for Richie to have the access needed.



This is an example of the habitat that RHWOs nest in at TNWR. There are three nest trees in this photo alone. Richie explained that there were areas where RHWOs were nesting that were inaccessible by foot, vehicle, canoe or kayak because of water, downed trees, and terrain. While walking through areas we could access on foot, I was shown nest trees that looked exactly like nest trees at Cedar Creek ESR, dead and with heart rot fungi conks all over them. What was really interesting was learning that Richie had documented three widowmaker nests that had fledged young. One is in the picture above near the arrow.



Above is one of the three successful widowmaker nests at Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge located by Richie Swanson. Below is a cropped picture to show the widowmaker a bit closer.



This widowmaker used as a nest “tree” at TNWR looks as perilous as the one at Cedar Creek ESR. The three successful widowmaker nests that Richie Swanson documented at TRWR along with the successful one at Cedar Creek ESR total four known widowmaker nests by Red-headed Woodpeckers that have fledged nestlings within five years.

As we search for nests in the future we will need to look carefully at widowmakers as possible sites.

Widowmaker used as a Red-headed Woodpecker winter roost in 2019-20 in Cedar Creek ESR



In the late fall of 2019 Jim Howitz (a RhWR volunteer) discovered that a color-banded female Red-headed Woodpecker known as Hazel was roosting at night in an unusual location, a widowmaker. This roost was located about 40 yards from one of her successful 2019 nests. On November 6th, Jim hiked in with me to show me this very unusual roost location. He had observed her entering the cavity several evenings just before dark. I took a few pictures with my phone for documentation. I lightened up the widowmaker for these pictures so the cavities could be seen. Hazel was using the top cavity. Jim Howitz can be seen in the left picture in the lower right corner.

Summary: Widowmakers still seem like a very unlikely place to find Red-headed Woodpeckers nesting and roosting, but here we have four documented successful nests and a winter roost, each in a separate widowmaker. In some ways it makes some sense. In over 611 Red-headed Woodpecker nests 91.5 % were in dead trees or dead branches of live trees with many more dead trees in these areas. Many widowmakers are seen and avoided while conducting daily surveys of active Red Head nests. They are simply a part of the landscape wherever Red Heads nest. And Red Heads are very good at taking advantage of opportunities within their territories. Any tree that is in the right place and the right state of heartwood decay is a potential nest or roost to a Red-headed Woodpecker, regardless of how it is connected to the ground or tree canopy.