

As habitat for the red-headed woodpecker vanishes, so goes this Illinois showpiece.

# The Red-headed Stranger

Story By Rachel Mahan  
Photo By Adele Hodde

**S**triking! “Distinctive!” “Elegant!” Exclamations usually reserved for movie stars on the red carpet are hard to avoid when describing the red-headed woodpecker. No matter the occasion, the males and females are equally well-dressed. But beware of knock-offs: Red-bellied woodpeckers have a dab of red on their crowns, while only the red-headed woodpecker has an entirely red head and neck.

Also beware of a common misconception: A red-headed woodpecker on a telephone pole is probably not making Swiss cheese of solid wood. Usually, the woodpeckers are just hollowing out a soft knot that they find, said Jeffery Walk, a conservation planner for The Nature Conservancy in Illinois. To keep their balance while pecking, the 8-inch birds grip with two of their toes pointed forward and two pointed backward. They don't always have to create new holes, though. Woodpeckers can use existing ones—and sometimes even force other animals out—to raise their broods of about five chicks.

Red-headed woodpeckers, whose calls sound like tchur-tchur or quarr-quarr, are one of the most aggressive and omnivorous of their kind. They will eat anything from insects to fruit to eggs and occasionally other birds and small rodents. Once they catch their food—insects procured in mid-air, seeds foraged on the ground, sometimes larvae drilled from inside trees—they may cache it for winter. They've been said to wedge grasshoppers into

crevices on fence posts or stash acorns in the knotholes of barns. But unless there is a good acorn crop, they will migrate to the southern part of the state or farther south in the winter.

Open Illinois woodlands are at the heart of the birds' range, which extends over much of the Eastern U.S. However, the woodpeckers are “not doing particularly well anywhere,” said Walk, who formerly worked for the Department of Natural Resources. Their numbers have declined as the snags or dead trees they use for nesting are cut down, along with other alterations to their environment and competition with European starlings. Both Illinois

**Despite its reputation as an aggressive woodpecker, a decline in red-headed woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) populations appears to be related to the removal of snags and dead trees.**



and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recognize the red-headed woodpecker as a species in need of conservation.



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