

The Pileated Woodpecker is a colorful, crested bird

BY LAURI SHAFFER



LAURI SHAFFER/Special to the Sun-Gazette A family of Pileated Woodpeckers gather at their nest in a tree.

If you have ever seen a crow-sized woodpecker with a flaming red back-swept crown — reminiscent of Woody Woodpecker — then you have been fortunate enough to observe a Pileated Woodpecker.

Pileated means crested, and it is by far our largest woodpecker. The male has a bright red moustache along with its crest.

Like other woodpeckers, it has an undulating flight path rather than the steady and straight path of the American Crow, and its large white wing patches are noticeable when it flies. Often it gives its maniacal cry as it flies from tree to tree, alerting others of its territory, which it defends year-round. It sounds very much like a Northern Flicker but has more variation in pitch.

The powerful dagger-like beak of the Pileated is strong enough to put large oblong holes into big trees where it excavates tunnels of carpenter ants, its favorite food. Berries, caterpillars, grubs, and other insects are also part of its diet. They have also been known to visit backyard feeders with suet and seed.

Like all woodpeckers, the Pileated has long, stiff tail feathers used to prop itself up when it feeds. If your suet feeder is hanging on a tree or your feeder comes with a long support below the suet cage, you may be one of the lucky ones to get them coming to your feeding station. We are still waiting for ours, although we see them often from the window.

Our yard has many healthy oaks, cherry, and some dying ash and other trees. When woodpeckers target our trees, we know that there are carpenter ants inside. They may be doing us a favor by removing these destructive insects, even though they leave large holes behind. They use their strong barbed tongues to find their food and retrieve it from cavities in rotting wood. Their rectangular or oval holes are unique to their species.

Last summer a neighbor stopped by to let us know they had a Pileated Woodpecker nest in a huge dead tree in their woods. What an incredible experience to be able to spend hours observing and taking photos of both male and female woodpeckers feeding their three noisy babies.

At that time, they were getting close to fledging and looked and sounded much like the adults. Like all babies, they also made a harsh begging sound to get the attention of the parents. We watched the adult fly in, put its bill inside the young bird's beak and vigorously

regurgitate grubs and other food into its throat several times. Usually only one bird was fed during each visit.

After leaving the nest hole a month after hatching, the juveniles will still be fed by the adults for another couple months. When the juvenile birds have learned to take care of themselves, they will need to find their own territories. Even though they do not migrate, they will spread out to other neighboring areas, claiming their own territory which can be 150-200 acres.

Unfortunately for us, Pileated Woodpeckers will rarely reuse the same nest hole and it may be a long time before we witness this sight again. The size of this powerful bird, the gorgeous red crest, and the crazy cries of the Pileated Woodpecker are unforgettable.