

The Woodpeckers

Kentucky's Woodland Excavators

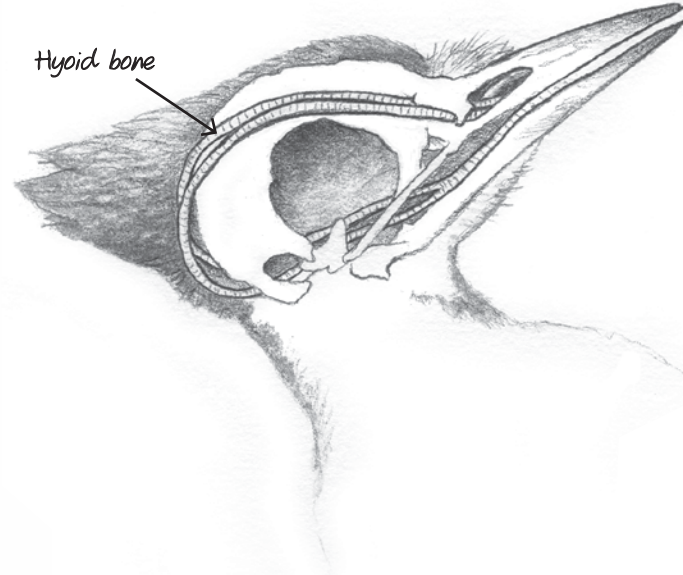
Story and illustrations by Rick Hill

There are more than 180 species of woodpeckers worldwide. Seven species make their home in Kentucky. They differ in habitats and size, with the sparrow-sized downy woodpecker being the smallest, and the crow-sized pileated woodpecker being the largest. The other species in Kentucky include the hairy, red-bellied and red-headed woodpeckers, plus the yellow-bellied sapsucker and the common flicker, the state's only brown woodpecker.

Insects that hide from birds underneath tree bark or deep in the wood are tasty morsels for the woodpecker. With its specialized adaptations for chiseling through wood, this bird is a highly efficient predator.

The woodpecker's thick skull, strong muscles and beak allow it to withstand violent, repeated blows. The powerful chisel-like bill of the woodpecker enables it to probe loose bark and excavate wood for food and nesting cavities.

Hyoid bone



The woodpecker's long tongue begins at the hyoid bone. It extends from the nostril around the skull and out the mouth. Its sticky tongue has barbs to catch insects or hair-like bristles to collect sap.

Stiff feathers covering the nostrils keep out small pieces of wood.

The woodpecker's diet consists mainly of insects, among them carpenter ants and beetle larvae. They also eat fruits, nuts and berries. Tree sap makes up a large part of the yellow-bellied sapsucker's diet, hence its name.

Nesting holes vary in size by species. The pileated woodpecker makes a large, distinctive rectangular hole.

Whether feeding, excavating or using its rapid, rhythmic drumming to communicate, the woodpecker is often heard before it is seen. You can identify a woodpecker in flight by its distinctive, undulating flight as it moves from tree to tree.

The woodpecker's feet and large claws are designed for the vertical life. With two toes facing forward and two toes facing backward, it can move up and down tree trunks with ease. The feet of most birds have three toes forward and one backward.

Male pileated woodpecker



The woodpecker's stiff tail feathers provide a firm prop while the bird probes for food, excavates a nest or drums.

