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Pileated Woodpecker

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Dryocopus pileatus

The pileated woodpecker is the largest resident woodpecker found today in Alabama. The one exception would have been the larger native ivory-billed woodpecker. However, the ivory-billed woodpecker is long believed to be extirpated from the state due to the vast destruction of its old growth forested habitat. Unfortunately, like in other states, no recent sightings or scientific evidence suggest the existence of the ivory-billed woodpecker in Alabama.

Description

The pileated woodpecker is a strikingly beautiful crow-size woodpecker ranging throughout forested areas of Alabama and the eastern United States. It is also found in the western United States from Washington south to California and east to North Dakota, and in Canada from British Columbia east to Nova Scotia.

Both sexes are dark black and similar in appearance. Both the male and female have a bright red pointed crest and crown. Only the male has a red forehead and mustache, distinguishing himself from the female. Both sexes have a white stripe on both sides of face extending from the base of bill, under the eye and down the neck. They also have a white stripe above the eye and the throat area is white. White also adorns the bases of the primary feathers and under wing linings. A large contrasting white patch underneath the front half of each wing can easily be seen when the bird is in flight.

Shy and wary of humans, the pileated woodpecker is not known to migrate long

distances. Its flight is strong with irregular flaps of the wings. Both sexes drum on a selected hollow dead tree, a loud rolling tap that can last up to five minutes to announce their territory dominance to other inhabitants and to attract a mate. The pileated will also drum before it is about to go to roost. The pileated emits a loud repetitive call – never just a single note. Once you have heard and identified the call (almost a laughing sound) of the pileated woodpecker, you will not likely forget it.

Diet

When foraging, the pileated uses its large strong bill to strip bark and chisel characteristic rectangular holes up to six inches wide in decaying trees. After insects are exposed, the pileated woodpecker uses its extremely long, sticky tongue to reach prey. Its diet consists mainly of wood-boring insects and it is especially fond of carpenter ants. It is common to see where a pileated has demolished rotten stumps and logs in search for these little morsels. Seasonal nuts and berries also make up this woodpecker's well-rounded diet.

Habitat and Reproduction

Pileated woodpeckers are very good parents and thought to pair for life. They are very selective of their nesting cavities and will return to the same nesting site year after year. Deciduous trees are seemingly preferred for constructing

nest cavities. This may be due to the denser composition and physical ability of hardwood trees to endure the wearing elements of nature longer.

Because of its large size, the pileated prefers large trees for nesting and for roosting. Tree diameter size can be up to and greater than 20 inches. Nesting cavity height can be 15-80 feet above ground. The somewhat triangular designed cavity entrance hole is approximately 3½ inches across at the top and 4½ inches across the bottom and generally faces south or east. The cavity hole is also outwardly and downwardly beveled, most likely to aide the woodpecker in entering and leaving cavity entrance. Depending on the wood density of the selected tree, it may take a pair up to two months to complete a single cavity.

Generally the pileated constructs a new cavity for each brood or deepens an old cavity before using it for a second time. A cavity can be from 10-30 inches deep. It is not uncommon for a single tree that has been used for several years to contain several constructed cavities. Each member of the pair excavates and uses its own roosting cavities located within their territory and not far away from the nesting cavity.

Beginning in early April through May, the female lays three to eight eggs in the cavity, which is lined only with finely splintered wood shavings. Both parents incubate the eggs with the male assuming the incubation role at night.

After two weeks, the young hatch naked with eyes closed. The parents are very defensive and caring of their young. They feed the new hatchlings, which will fledge in about a month, regurgitated insects by inserting their long bill into the throat of young. The youngsters will remain with the parents for up to three months after leaving the security of the nest cavity. During this time, they are taught how to forage for themselves and other secrets of the wild. This time spent with the parents greatly increases their survival.

Conservation Status

The pileated woodpecker is a common, breeding, permanent resident in all wooded areas throughout Alabama. The virtue of this bird's adaptability and good parenting skills have greatly contributed to its survival. The distant cry of a pileated in the wild will turn anyone's head for just a glimpse of this beautiful monarch woodpecker. 🐦