

Red-headed Woodpecker *Melanerpes erythrocephalus*



Folk Name: Black, white, and red Woodpecker, Half-Jacket, Shirt-tail

Status: Resident

Abundance: Uncommon

Habitat: Open forest, parks, planted groves, bottomland forest (winter)

Adult Red-headed Woodpeckers are very distinct and striking birds. They have a bright red cowl covering their head, nape, and throat. Underneath they are pure white. Their back, most of their wings, and tail are bluish-black, and they have an obvious white rump and white inner-wing patches. At 9 ¼ inches, this woodpecker is the same size as both our common Red-bellied Woodpecker and our elusive Hairy Woodpecker. It is an uncommon year-round resident throughout the Central Carolina region.

The Red-headed Woodpecker was once a common breeding resident throughout the eastern United States. Early on, this woodpecker adapted well to living in cities and towns, where there were plenty of scattered trees or groves where it could catch insects, find acorns, and dig out insect larvae. It would often nest in holes in wooden telephone poles or flag poles when holes in trees were sparse. The Red-headed Woodpecker was so well known that it was one of the few birds nominated for consideration to become the “state bird” of North Carolina. The proposal submitted in the early 1940s read: “The Red-headed Woodpecker with its red-white-and-black plumage is familiar to everyone, particularly in the towns. Its food includes insects and acorns.”

In the late 1870s, Leverett Loomis described the Red-headed Woodpecker as abundant in the summer in



Red-headed Woodpecker with young. (Will Stuart)



Chester County, but he reported that its winter abundance would often vary, as flocks would migrate about locally or regionally in part due to changes in the availability of mast crops, like acorns:

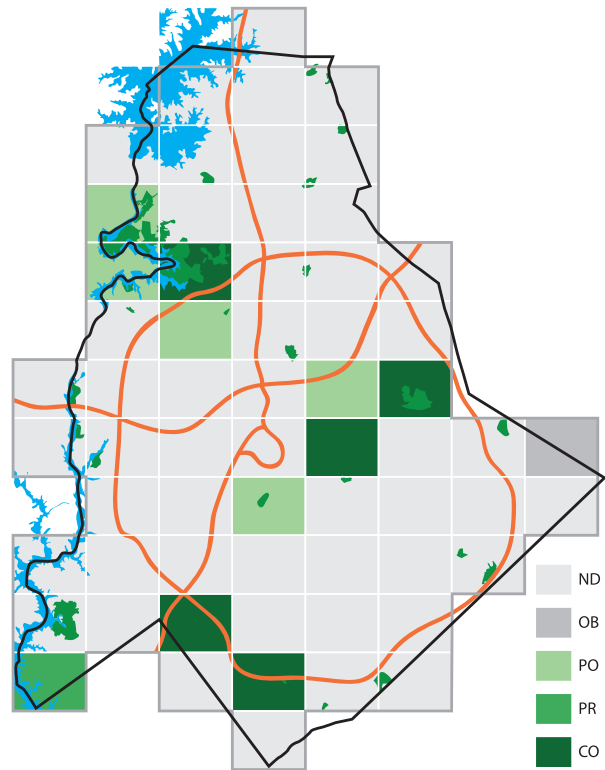
Toward the close of December, 1884, they were common in the northeastern part of the County near Landsford on the Catawba River. ...It is apparent that a territory may be occupied one season and partially or wholly abandoned the next. ...It should be further added that these singular removals are so marked and well known that they have long attracted the attention of observant country residents.

William McIlwaine regularly commented on the status of the Red-headed Woodpecker around Charlotte in the late 1920s. “We have a few red-headed woodpeckers with us, and of course they are permanent residents; but there are not nearly so many as are to be found in the eastern part of the state. ...And the red headed woodpeckers seem to have had a prolific summer. Old and young are much in evidence.” On April 6, 1929, he noted this species as a “fairly common” to “common” local bird that nested here but was “rare in winter.”

In the early 1900s, ornithologists began to document dramatic declines in the population of Red-headed Woodpeckers. Many anecdotal reports correlated this decline with an increase in the population of the non-native European Starling. Red-bellied Woodpeckers would abandon their nest cavity in lieu of fighting Starlings for the space. Unfortunately, Red-headed Woodpeckers would often fight them to the death, and as one observer noted: “it is always the woodpecker that is defeated.” Indeed, many birders believed that “the Red-

headed Woodpecker’s aggressiveness is the very thing that has doomed it.” One observer noted: “The fact that I killed 60 starlings at one woodpecker hole in a few weeks gives some idea of their overpowering numbers that far exceed the supply of suitable nest sites.” In the late 1900s, as populations of European Starlings began a natural decline, especially in the Northeast, scientists noted “the Red-headed Woodpecker experienced a significant increase.” Unfortunately, their overall population is still in trouble. The Red-headed Woodpecker is listed on the Yellow Watch List of birds of the continental United States. It is considered a species with both “troubling” population declines and “high threats,” and like many cavity-nesting species, it is in need of conservation action.

Breeding reports indicate the Red-headed Woodpecker begins nesting activity as early as February with May being the peak of egg laying; however, Mecklenburg County BBA observers confirmed nestlings still being fed in the nest as late as 11 August, which in all likelihood represents at least a second brood. Nesting was confirmed in both urban and rural parts of the county. One nest cavity was in the top of a standing dead tree in the middle of a shallow wetland surrounded by the manicured holes of a golf course. Data collected during the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas indicate a breeding code of confirmed or probable in 6 to 10 survey blocks for this species in the county. It was therefore designated as a “vulnerable” breeding bird.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Local (PR/1, CO/5)