

Living with West Indian Woodpeckers

By Caroline Stahala

The West Indian woodpecker is one of three woodpecker species found on Abaco. We are actually quite fortunate to find the West Indian woodpecker so common on Abaco, although I am sure there are times you may not necessarily feel this way. The species is rare on San Salvador, and additional populations can be seen in Cuba and the Cayman Islands. It used to be found on Grand Bahama but appears to have been extirpated at this point. Males and females are differentiated by the extent of the red on the head. The female's red cap only extends as far as the black eyebrow while the male's red head extends to its beak. A study on Abaco also showed that this species exhibits a polyandrous behavior, which means that in some cases the female actually has more than one nest at the same time with more than one male. This behavior is quite unique among birds.

What many of you would like to know about, though, is how to keep the woodpeckers from drilling holes into your house or drumming away on your gutters. So, what can you do to make them stop or redirect their behavior so that we can coexist? Here are a few suggestions with explanations about the behaviors.

There are three main reasons woodpeckers drum or peck. First, they are looking for food. The West Indian woodpecker is omnivorous and will eat anything from bugs to fruits or small lizards. If a woodpecker is drilling a hole in your house because it is looking for food, then you have bigger problems than the woodpecker. In most cases this is not the reason for drilling into houses, however.

This time of year (May - July) you may see an increase in woodpecker activity, this is because it is their breeding season. This brings us to the other two reasons you will find them drilling into your house; reason 2 to attract mates and reason 3 to create a nest cavity. Woodpeckers display their attractiveness to the opposite sex and territorial defense by drumming as loudly as possible. If a woodpecker can find a spot that makes his drumming sound louder and carry farther then this is a good quality in their world. That's why they tend to find corners with good acoustics or metal features such as gutters. The territorial defense should last only a couple of months so the best way to handle this situation is to cover 'problem' areas in some way using flashing, foam, or other plastic that dampens the sound and makes the area acoustically unattractive.

Woodpeckers are cavity nesting birds and if a cavity does not exist, they are able to build their own by drilling into dead wood. West Indian woodpeckers use dead or dying trees to create holes for their cavities. In their view, any wood resembling

dead or dying trees is fair game, including your house. Keep dead or dying trees around the area to encourage the birds to use them instead of the house. If the wood on the house is the only dead wood around, it is completely understandable this is what they will use to make holes in. Basically you are limiting the resources available to them and replacing with your building. Woodpeckers are more than happy to use existing holes as nest cavities. If you place simple woodpecker size bird houses (Fig 1) they are likely to use them instead of building their own in your house. I have noticed that they seem to like palms as well, I presume because the wood is softer, so try planting a variety of palm to encourage the birds to use these instead of the house.

Woodpecker side note...

If you have ever wondered why woodpeckers don't get a headache when drilling, they have special adaptations to the eyes and brain to insulate them from the pressure.

Simple Woodpecker Coexistence strategies

1. Place sound dampening material in areas woodpeckers are drumming.
2. Leave dead trees in your yard
3. Set up bird houses for them to use

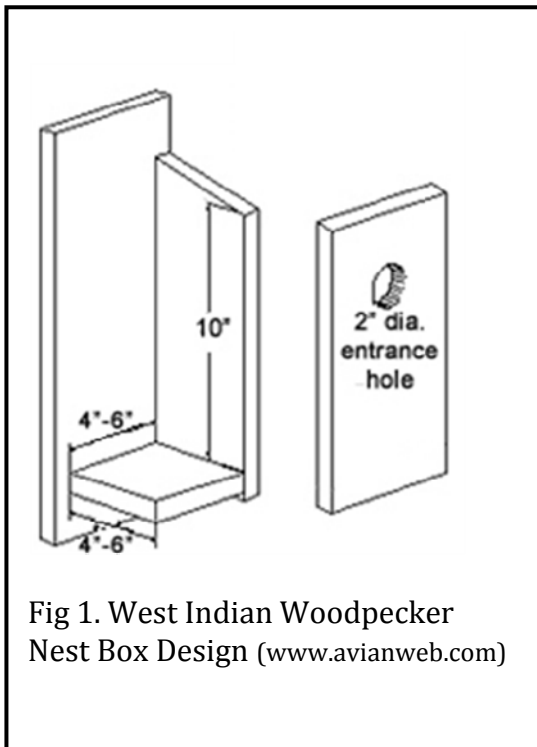


Fig 1. West Indian Woodpecker Nest Box Design (www.avianweb.com)



West Indian woodpecker in nest box