

Notes

Pileated Woodpecker eating dogwood berries

by
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On 3 September 1994, along with Heather Mackey and Bryan Bertie, we observed a Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*) near the Visitor Centre and Lighthouse at Presqu'île Provincial Park, Northumberland County. It was unusually tame around people. The apparent attraction for the woodpecker was the Red-osier Dogwoods (*Cornus stolonifera*) growing around the Visitor Centre. Twice we observed the Pileated perch awkwardly near the top of two dogwoods and eat several berries from each shrub. Ryan (1978) states the fruit of the Red-osier Dogwood is "eagerly eaten by birds". We also learned from Robert Dawson (pers. comm.) that he saw a Pileated Woodpecker eating wild grapes (*Vitis* sp.) near Hamilton in the fall of 1994.

Neither of us could ever remember seeing or hearing about Pileated Woodpeckers eating fruit. A search of the literature revealed some insights into this behaviour. Bent (1939) reports that Pileated Woodpeckers eat mainly wood-boring insects, but supplement their diet with a variety of fruits and nuts including acorns, wild grapes, holly, poison ivy, sumac, hackberry and dogwood. Hoyt (1957) summarizes, "In the fall of the year the pileated woodpecker may be found feeding on

many species of fruits as well as mast in the form of wild nuts". However, we could find only one reference to Pileated Woodpeckers eating dogwood berries in Ontario. Mills (1982) says that "It has twice been reported eating alternate-leafed dogwood berries in the Huntsville region".

We conclude that wild berries are an important part of the diet of Pileated Woodpeckers in Ontario, particularly in autumn.

Why have we not seen this behaviour before? It may be because most Pileated Woodpeckers in Ontario are rather secretive and difficult to observe in their favoured mature forest habitat. However, in recent years this "denizen of extensive forests" has become more visible as it adapts to urban areas and smaller woodlots. Therefore, we would expect more observations of berry-eating behaviour.

Acknowledgements

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Literature cited

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Downy Woodpecker eating elderberries

by
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Most species of woodpeckers make some use of plant material (berries, nuts, etc.) in their diets (Bent 1939, Cramp 1985). However, fruit is not usually a major component of the diets of most species. Woodpeckers tend to specialize on insects of various orders and families. There are some notable exceptions to specialized insectivory, however. Some species are quite opportunistic and omnivorous, or even have become specialized on certain plant foods. The Acorn Woodpecker (*Melanerpes formicivorus*) is one obvious example of a North American species that specializes on fruits (acorns of various western oaks (*Quercus* spp.)), at least in the winter. Sapsuckers (*Sphyrapicus* spp.) are noted for their use of sap, and will switch to "... a vegetarian diet ..." when other sources of food become scarce (Lawrence 1966; R.J. Pittaway, pers. comm.). In Eurasia,

the Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*) frequently feeds on coniferous tree seeds in the winter, and searches for fruit and nuts on the ground. The Syrian Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos syriacus*) consumes significant amounts of fruit, including species of agricultural value, such as cherries, plums, apricots, almonds, apples, and pears. It is also unique among woodpeckers in feeding fruit to its young (Cramp 1985).

The food sources of North American woodpeckers appear to be less well documented than those of Eurasian species. Bent (1939) and Terres (1982) note examples of the use of fruits in some species, and Iron and Pittaway (1995) describe this behaviour in the Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*), in this issue of *Ontario Birds*. Several authors, including Jackson (1970), Kilham (1970), Lawrence (1966), and