



Oklahoma's Largest Woodpecker

by Dan L. Reinking

Quick—what is Oklahoma's largest woodpecker? The answer to that question really depends on what the definition of is is. At one time, the largest woodpecker in Oklahoma (and the U.S.) was the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, now very likely extinct due to unrestrained logging of old growth bottomland forests in the southeastern U.S. during the 19th and 20th centuries. The demise of this spectacular animal, once known colloquially by the name Lord God Bird because of the dramatic impression it made on the people who saw it, means that the Pileated Woodpecker is currently the largest woodpecker in Oklahoma.

Essentially non-migratory, Pileated Woodpeckers mate for life and inhabit mature forest, especially river bottom forest, where their loud calls and stentorian drumming announce their presence. Mature forests are required, in part for the very practical reason that Pileated Woodpeckers are big, and they therefore require large trees in which to nest and roost. Often described as "crow-sized," Pileated Woodpeckers are nearly 17 inches long and have a wingspan of nearly 30 inches. Males have a red forehead and moustache, while these areas are black on females. The red crest, along with white head and neck stripe, are prominent features, as is the large white underwing patch visible in flight. Indeed, one of the most impressive views one can have of a Pileated Woodpecker is when it is flying across a forest opening. Its size becomes particularly evident, and its broad wings seem to move in slow motion, giving the impression that it may fall from the sky at any moment.

The strong, chisel-like bill of the Pileated Woodpecker makes it an efficient and powerful excavator. Nest cavities are chiseled in a dead tree by both sexes, though mostly by the male, in 3-6 weeks. The oval-shaped entrance typically measures about 3.5 inches wide by 4 inches tall. A clutch of eggs, often 4 in number, is incubated by both sexes for about 18 days, and young leave the nest in another 24-28 days. Nest cavities are rarely reused for nesting, though they may later be used for roosting.

The chiseling ability of this species helps it specialize in eating carpenter ants and wood-dwelling beetle larvae, though it also consumes seasonal fruits and nuts. Pileated Woodpeckers have themselves served as food for a number of animals. Though John James Audubon described their flesh as being unpalatable, Pileated Woodpeckers were shot for human food and even sold in markets in the 19th century. A 1910 observation suggested that a "huge wildcat" had captured one unlucky woodpecker as it foraged on a low stump. More commonly, avian predators are responsible for capturing this species. Coopers Hawks, Northern Goshawks, Great Horned Owls, and Barred Owls are all known or suspected predators of Pileated Woodpeckers. Writing in 1930, George M. Sutton described personally witnessing a Peregrine Falcon in Pennsylvania "pursue and with ease strike down a pileated woodpecker that had started to fly across the river...A cloud of feathers burst from the body of the victim as it collapsed."

Occasional predation notwithstanding, the main threat faced by this species today is loss or fragmentation of its mature forest habitat. Paying a visit to a nearby woods may reward you with a glimpse of this impressive bird, and perhaps cause you to reflect on the loss of Oklahoma's true largest woodpecker.

