

RESTORING HABITAT FOR THE WHITE-HEADED WOODPECKER

Why do White-headed Woodpeckers need our help?

White-headed Woodpeckers are Provincially “Red-listed” and considered Federally Endangered due to small population size, restricted range, a dependency on Ponderosa Pine seeds, and loss and degradation of habitat. In Canada, this woodpecker is known to breed only in the southern Okanagan Valley as far north as Naramata.

The two critical needs for White-headed Woodpeckers in the South Okanagan are a good food source and snags for nesting sites.



About 24cm (9 inches) long, the White-headed Woodpecker has a snowy-white head and throat, black body, and white wing patches that show up well in flight. The male has a red patch on the back of his head.

More than fifty years of selective logging of large Ponderosa Pine trees and fire suppression have resulted in dramatic habitat changes. Logging has removed the large Ponderosa Pines, which provided abundant seeds for food and large decaying trees for nesting and roosting. Fire suppression has allowed the establishment of dense stands of immature Ponderosa Pine as well as the more shade tolerant Douglas-fir. The result is increased fuel loads that increase the potential for more severe fires, destroying any remaining mature trees and the large snags. With the increase in density of immature trees comes increased competition for nutrients, fewer pine seeds, few or no snags, and a gradual change from a climax forest dominated by Ponderosa Pine to one dominated by Douglas-fir. Mature and old growth forests have also been lost to urban and agricultural development. Even current selective logging practices require the falling of snags for safety reasons. Also, many snags valuable for wildlife are cut for firewood, despite permit regulations restricting the cutting of large diameter snags.

Firewood cutters should be aware that their permits do not allow the cutting of snags over 40cm diameter at breast height (dbh). This may be reduced in the future.

What does good habitat look like?

White-headed Woodpeckers prefer open park-like mature and old Ponderosa Pine forests with large-diameter decaying trees for both nesting and roosting, and abundant seed cones for food. Nests are found most often in more decayed, large diameter snags (> 40 cm dbh/diameter at breast height). In British Columbia, nest cavities have been found 2.4m to 9m above the ground. White-headed Woodpeckers excavate a new cavity every year for their nests, sometimes beginning several holes before selecting one. Although mature Ponderosa Pine is the preferred habitat, nests have also been found in Douglas-fir and Western Larch.



Open, mature Ponderosa Pine forest

How can you improve the habitat for White-headed Woodpeckers on your land?



Often cut for firewood, wildlife trees are vital for nesting, denning, feeding, perching and as shelter for numerous species.



Landowners experiencing a beetle kill should be aware that beetles have usually gone by the time the tree appears to be dying. Retain larger diameter trees for future wildlife trees.

- Preserve existing mature and old growth stands of Ponderosa Pine.
- Retain standing dead trees wherever it is safe to do so. Some snags can remain standing for more than 40 years. Also retain living, slightly decayed trees that are large in diameter and have soft interiors.

Be sure to consult a hazard tree assessor about the safety of wildlife trees (snags), especially if they are near your house.

- Retain large coarse woody debris for small wildlife.
- Use manual thinning of young trees and, if feasible, low-intensity burning, to manage forests to produce more open habitats (i.e. 20-50% canopy closure) with healthier trees and understory vegetation. This results in increased cone production and reduces densities of shade-tolerant Douglas-fir, mimicking the natural cycling of this ecosystem.
- Incorporate these improvements into a plan to reduce the fire hazard on your property. Enhancing even a portion of your property can help.



Thinning young trees opens the forest canopy.

If you think that your forested land would benefit from restoration such as thinning or prescribed fire, or if you would like more information, please contact the South Okanagan-Similkameen Stewardship Program at (250) 492-0173

For more information:

Robbins, K. and L. Scott. 2006. Fire Proofing With Care. Brochure, Living in Nature Series, South Okanagan-Similkameen Stewardship Program.

Blood, D.A. 1997. BC Wildlife at Risk brochure. White-headed Woodpecker. BC Ministry of Environment Identified Wildlife Management Strategy 2004. <http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/wld/identified/iwms2004.html>

Supported by:



To report sightings of White-headed Woodpeckers and other species at risk call toll-free 1-866-699-WILD (9453)