
Dead Trees, Disturbance, and Illinois' Red-headed Woodpeckers

The Illinois River at Two Rivers National Wildlife Refuge was over its banks in a typical spring flood. I canoed through the forest about a foot above ground. Filtered sunlight gave the woods an almost phosphorescent light green glow; humidity was low, mosquitoes absent. These were perfect conditions to simply sit and listen to the discordant croakings and other bizarre sounds coming from the great blue heron rookery above my head.

Then, just when the thought struck that I was within the wildest, most primeval place in Illinois, where natural rhythms of the river reign supreme, the strangest growling sound of all commanded my attention. The sound came not from herons, but from two red-headed woodpeckers vying for a coveted hole near the top of a standing dead tree. Although red-headed woodpeckers are abundant along the river, and on that day all seemed right, in fact, the red-headed woodpecker has been declining in Illinois by nearly 2 percent per year. I was not sure, but I suspected perhaps the decline might have something to do with most of Illinois being just about

Side Channels

the opposite of wild and primeval. In effect, the woodpeckers delivered an environmental message to me that I found troubling. I felt compelled to begin a search for more information.

Habitats

One of the most unusual behaviors one would expect a woodpecker to engage in is flycatching for insects. Woodpeckers are experts at climbing trees. In general, though, they appear much less agile in flight compared to tyrant flycatchers or any of the swallows. Yet leaving a foraging perch to pick out an insect from the air, sometimes after a convoluted chase, is a common foraging technique for red-headed woodpeckers during the breeding season. This type of behavior requires open habitats with widely-spaced trees. Indeed, the cavity-nesting red-headed woodpecker is often characterized as a bird of savannas, a transitional habitat type between true prairie (totally lacking in trees) and closed-canopy forest. But since most of Illinois' savannas have long been replaced with developed landscapes, breeding red-heads have adapted to other types of open landscapes, including farm country, which serve as surrogates for the missing savannas. I have often observed red-heads flying across agricultural fields, eventually landing on a wooden utility pole, flying from pole to pole, and hawking for insects over the fields and roads. In some instances, they may return after a catch to the original foraging perch. Perhaps the utility poles form the same function as scattered standing dead timber in their original savanna habitats.

Hawking red-heads can also be found along Illinois' rivers, lakes, and wetlands. Floodplain woodlands along the Illinois River, in particular, appear to provide ideal breeding habitat. The floodplain woodlands have suffered greatly in recent years from frequent flooding. But this has given rise to an abundance of snags and has caused most floodplain woodlands to have a rather open aspect.

