



Woodpeckers: Easton's Percussionists

Who's that knockin' on my door?
All last night and the night before?
Boom, boom, boom
Bang, bang, bang
I can't stand this awful thing
Who's that knockin' on my door?

With a nod to the Genie's 1954 doo-wop classic, ["Who's that Knockin' on My Door?"](#), Easton residents are awakening to the knock, knock, knocking of woodpeckers. Though they've been known to knock on an occasional door, they more often opt for wood siding or unpainted fascia boards.

Miley Bull, an Easton resident and director of the Connecticut Audubon Society, gets many calls when woodpeckers set their sights on local homes. He advises callers to “paint fascia boards with enamel paint and cut away branches and shrubs near the house. This makes things less attractive to woodpeckers. They like unpainted wood.”

According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, “Also attractive [to woodpeckers] are metal downspouts, gutters, chimneys and vents.”

So why exactly are these woodpeckers pecking?

It turns out they have three principle agendas.

First, all woodpeckers peck for food. “They tap on trees in various places on the trunk to hear a hollow sound, which means there are insects hibernating under the bark, such as carpenter ants,” Bull said.

The males also peck to announce their territory. “They create a sounding board...and have even been known to drum on aluminum siding, even the TV antennas when we had them,” he added.

They tap for food and drum for dominance using two discrete cadences.

Woodpeckers also peck larger holes in which to nest. According to the Audubon Society blog, “In order to keep out big predators, they carve entrances that are just large enough for them to come and go.”



Hard to believe a woodpecker can do this much damage. The tree had to be cut down.

Don't they get a headache from all that pecking?

“They have strong beaks and specialized muscles around their skulls that act as shock absorbers,” said Bull.

There are six different woodpecker species commonly found in Easton. The small varieties include the downy, redbellied, hairy, and the northern flicker seen here:



The Northern Flicker is one of the woodpeckers common to Easton. — Tomas Koeck
Photo

Then there's the yellow belly, a woodpecker as well as an insult. Early Westerns favored the term to describe a coward. In 1956, the name came into prominence on the "[The Honeymooners](#)."

For reasons unknown, the Yellow bellies have a distinctive drumming cadence. They tap at customary pace and then slow down the rhythm at the end. Sort of like an audio fade out. Take a listen. https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Yellow-bellied_Sapsucker/sounds

In addition to the smaller species, the pileated, a large variety, are common in Easton as well. They're the size of a crow. The Audubon Society blog describes them as "A big dashing bird with a flaming crest." Not surprisingly, Woody Woodpecker was modeled on the pileated. Big and loud. [His laugh even resembles the call of the pileated](#).

Okay, Woody's laugh is an exaggeration. [Here's what the pileated really sounds like](#).

And here's what he actually looks like:



The Pileated Woodpecker, larger than the other varieties, was the inspiration for Woody Woodpecker because of his vivid crest and loud call. — Tomas Koeck Photo

On a separate, strange note, the smaller species make round holes in a variety of sizes and patterns. The pileated makes square holes. No woodpecker has ever explained why: <https://askanaturalist.com/who-made-mysterious-rectangular-tree-holes/>.

As the weather is warm and bird activity is at its peak, Easton residents can follow the tribal drumbeats of many woodpeckers. Some may even be doing a gig in the back yard.

Bird photos by Tomas Koeck