

BACKYARDS FOR WILDLIFE

ATTRACTING WOODPECKERS

A flash of red among the leaves and the drum of a beak against a tree are iconic signs of a woodpecker. This unique bird family is a favorite among birders, and there are many ways to entice woodpeckers to your yard.

Woodpeckers are common throughout Ohio, with seven species native to the state. These species are the downy woodpecker, hairy woodpecker, northern flicker, red-bellied woodpecker, red-headed woodpecker, pileated woodpecker, and yellow-bellied sapsucker. All but the yellow-bellied sapsucker, which migrates north during the summer months, can be observed in Ohio year-round.

Observing woodpeckers comes easy for the trained eye. Woodpeckers are relatively large compared to other songbirds, though the downy woodpecker is the smallest. Additionally, the sound they create when drumming their beaks against tree trunks is distinctive, even if the bird is out of sight. Woodpeckers drum their beaks to announce their territory, search for insects that burrow in the bark, or excavate nest cavities.

The unique drumming behavior has caused woodpeckers to evolve fascinating anatomical features. While most bird species have three toes facing forward and one backward, woodpeckers feature two toes facing forward and two facing backward, perfect for vertical climbing. Their long and pointy beaks conceal a barbed tongue that wraps around the skull, cushioning it from the impact of repeated drumming. To further avoid brain damage, woodpeckers have evolved small brains and skulls streamlined for impact.



DOWNY WOODPECKER

Despite the shared method of searching for food, the diets of woodpecker species can vary greatly. Woodpeckers are mostly insectivorous, but some species also eat seeds, fruit, and small animals to sustain themselves through the winter.

Woodpeckers use a variety of habitats but thrive in woodlots and mature forests. However, most can live in fragmented habitats, allowing for birdwatching in neighborhoods. They prefer dead trees and logs when searching for food but also forage on living trees and even manmade structures.

Along with the entertainment they provide when drilling into a tree, woodpeckers are extremely important to ecosystems. They are especially good at controlling insect pest populations. Moreover, other bird species are secondary cavity nesters in abandoned woodpecker holes. Several species of songbirds, raptors, and waterfowl benefit from this nest service provided by woodpeckers.

Due to their abundance and broad diet, you will likely have woodpeckers visit your yard naturally, but designing your yard to be woodpecker-friendly is a great way to observe these fascinating birds. An easy place to start is by setting out suet, which is rendered

fat from beef, lamb, or mutton. This favorite food of woodpeckers is especially important in winter as a source of fat. It can be bought straight from butchers or in the form of suet cakes from most grocery or outdoor stores. Try your hand at homemade suet cakes with the DIY project on the next page and entice hungry woodpeckers to your yard!

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DIY SUET FEEDER

MATERIALS

- ▶ **ANIMAL FAT**
Can be purchased directly from a local butcher or grocery store
- ▶ **'TREAT' INGREDIENTS**
Can include seeds, dried fruit, chopped nuts, and dried insects.

TOOLS

- ▶ Saucepan
- ▶ Wooden spoon
- ▶ Fine mesh strainer
- ▶ Containers for molding suet
- ▶ Sharp knife or meat grinder



Suet can be kept frozen for up to six months until needed. Adding ingredients such as flour or cornmeal during mixing can change the suet to a crumblier texture if desired.

Square-shaped suet cage feeders are inexpensive and easy to find, and a quick search online provides a host of other feeder options that can be tailored to specific yards. If you wish to be more resourceful, you can craft a DIY cage.

Cages can be cut from hardware cloth and tied with wire in a cuboid shape, leaving an opening or latch at the top. These types of cages can be hung from a branch or a building for up-close woodpecker watching. Suet can also be hung in a net-like pouch such as a fish net as long as there is a place for woodpeckers to perch.

You can also make your suet in a doughnut shape and hang it from a branch. Keep feeders four to five feet above the ground to discourage unwanted visitors.

There are plenty of ways to put out suet, and woodpeckers will use any setup that has a perch to land on. Let your mind run wild as you think up ways to feed and observe Ohio's fascinating woodpeckers in your backyard. 🐦

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Cut animal fat into small pieces or put it through a meat grinder. Ensure all traces of meat and bone are removed.
- 2 Heat in a saucepan over low heat until it is fully liquefied, stirring frequently.
- 3 Once liquified, strain the fat to remove any particles. Repeat this step several times for best results. The liquid may need to be reheated between each straining.
- 4 Mix in other snacks (optional) such as chopped nuts, dried fruit bits, bird seed, and insects such as dried mealworms.
- 5 Allow the liquid to cool slightly and thicken before pouring it into a container or mold where it can solidify before being placed outside. Refrigerate or freeze until it is firm.