THE OHIO BACKYARD TREE FARM NEWS

Newsletter of the Ohio Backyard Tree Farm Committee

Over the Back Fence

by Mark Ervin

I have just returned from my visit to the site of **Ameriflora '92.** This was a most impressive display put on by many local and national companies within the green industry not to mention the many countries that have displayed their countries' styles and tastes in landscaping.

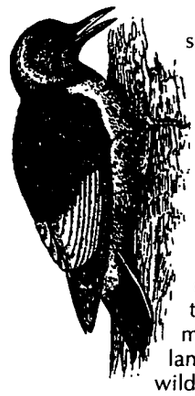
Of particular interest to me, and hopefully to backyard tree farmers, was the "Ohio's Backyards" display.. Since I have recently purchased a new home, I came away with many ideas on how I can landscape my small backyard and get quite a beautiful and functional space while reducing my maintenance.

Also of interest to me was a demonstration area that showed the maturation of a landscape in about 10 year intervals. It really demonstrated how each phase can be properly enhanced to take full advantage of what it has to offer. It also showed how dynamic a landscape can be with time.

In any case, if you, as a backyard tree farmer, have a real interest in learning how different trees, shrubs, vines and flowers can work in a landscape, take the time to visit **Ameriflora.** It will be worth the time to learn and treat your senses.

Woodlot Changes and the Decline of Red-headed Woodpeckers in Ohio

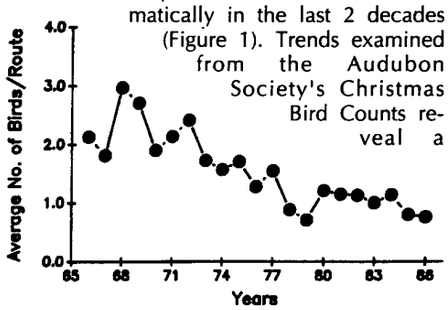
by Brad A. Andres



The importance of snags, dead or partially dead trees, is widely championed by wildlife managers. Private lands biologists persistently try to convince landowners to permit decadence in their timber stands. Although economic consequences of a reduced timber harvest are immediately evident to a landowner, what are the wildlife consequences of removing decadent, or potentially decadent, timber? The conflict of forestry practices and wildlife conservation has recently been at the forefront of national news. Urbanites or farmers, few are unaware of the issues involving the red-cockaded woodpecker and the northern spotted owl. Closer to home, I would like to demonstrate how land-use changes are affecting the abundance of an Ohio resident bird -- the red-headed woodpecker.

Red-headed woodpeckers are cavity-nesting birds that are slightly smaller than a robin. The striking red head of an adult contrasts markedly with a white underside and a black back. In flight, 2 large white wing patches are unmistakably noticeable on jet-black wings. Young birds can be distinguished by their brown heads and dull body plumage. Unlike most woodpeckers, red-heads favor plant foods as well as insects. They spend much of their time on the ground searching for acorns and beechnuts. They occasionally store these nuts in tree cavities for retrieval during winter months. Although some red-heads migrate out of Ohio for the winter, many will spend the entire year within the state's woodlands. They also differ from other Ohio woodpeckers by preferring open, moist wooded sites. Red-headed woodpeckers are most common in the western half of Ohio and reach their greatest North American abundance in the bottomlands of Iowa and Missouri.

At the turn of the century, the red-headed woodpecker was thought to be the most common woodpecker in the state. Since that time, numerous observers have suggested that red-head numbers have gradually dwindled. Although this information is based on the perception of bird-watchers, several recent surveys verify the accuracy of these perceptions. The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been conducting an annual roadside survey across the continent since 1966. Data from Ohio surveys indicate that red-headed woodpeckers have decreased dramatically in the last 2 decades (Figure 1). Trends examined from the Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Counts reveal a similar decreasing pattern. Declines are not uniform across the state, however. The population of red-headed woodpeckers inhabiting the western half of the state is substantially decreasing while the population inhabiting the eastern half of the state is remaining constant. Additionally, no other predominantly eastern Ohio woodpecker is decreasing in numbers.



Declines in the red-headed woodpecker could be caused by several factors. The introduced European starling has been implicated in the demise of the eastern bluebird (as well as other species). Starlings are cavity-nesters and will aggressively compete with other native birds for nest-sites. An increasing population of starlings could cause declines in cavity-nesting birds. Numbers of starlings, however, are stable in the state. Additionally, researchers found red-headed woodpeckers to be relatively resistant to starling competition. In fact, red-heads are

Wildlife Trees: Managing Habitat and Eliminating Hazards

by Sarah Andres

As a Backyard Tree Farmer, you are faced with managing the balance between providing habit for wildlife and insuring human safety on your property. While a decrepit cavity-laden tree looks like a mansion and a smorgasbord to wildlife inhabitants, it will certainly look like an accident waiting to happen to your human neighbors if a tree like that should fall and hurt someone, or cause damage to someone's property, you could be liable. As a responsible landowner, you are obligated to include safety in your property management considerations.

When does a wildlife tree become a safety hazard? A tree is considered hazardous when it possesses a structural defect that gives it the potential to damage something of value. The most important component of this definition is the target for potential damage. A target could be the roof of your house, your neighbor's car, a couple picnicking, a child playing in a sandbox, a scout group walking a trail, or someone fishing in a pond. Conversely, a deteriorated tree located far away from people and property is not considered a hazard because there is no target.

Defects like broken and dead branches, loose branch bark and limited areas of decay are not enough to brand a tree as hazardous. Careful monitoring of these signs could reveal otherwise vital growth. Healthy trees seal off areas of decay through a process that blocks decay from the rest of the wood. This barrier actually is what allows a cavity to take shape.

Frequent inspection of your trees is the best way to monitor their condition. If possible, two people should evaluate the trees and compare opinions. Use binoculars to check the tops of mature trees for cracks, decay fungi and broken branches. Walk all around a tree to check it from different angles. Try to imagine how the tree would fare in a storm.

If your inspection reveals a potentially hazardous situation, follow through with the necessary action to alleviate all threats. Take heed of warning signs like deep vertical trunk cracks or fungi growing at the tree's base. Complete removal may be the only remedy in these severe cases. Eliminating a danger can also include modifying the tree or, simply, moving the target. Properly pruning out a dead top or cabling a cavity branch are two remedies that effect only a portion of a tree. Discouraging people from entering a dangerous area by rerouting a trail or relocating a picnic table are other easy alternatives.

Records of your inspections and of any corrective actions are good tools to track the health of your trees. If necessary, this documentation could also serve as a valuable insurance policy. Make a standard checklist to use every time you inspect. If no hazardous trees are found, simply write that on your form. Record the following information during an inspection: date, inspector's names, site name, tree location, species, age, height, DBH, part of tree affected, defect description, target description, recommended actions and date corrective action was taken. Before and after photographs could also be helpful.

Backyard Tree Farm management includes avoiding the creation of hazardous trees. Give special attention to your mature trees. They are the least flexible to changes especially in their root area. Roots extend far beyond the drip line so steer far away from mature trees when constructing buildings, driveways, sidewalks, invisible fences or irrigation systems. Avoid over mature trees when setting up picnic and playground areas.

Supplemental habitat can be created by preserving downed trees and under brush or by providing nest boxes. In areas where a cavity tree would not be welcomed other non-hazardous wildlife shelters can be substituted. As a steward, you will have to consider creative options in order to find the balance between accommodating wildlife and human-life in your Backyard Tree Farm.

(Sarah is a member of the Backyard Tree Farm Committee and the Parks Horticulturist for the city of Dublin)

For additional information on these subjects contact your local forester, arborist or refer to the following manuals:

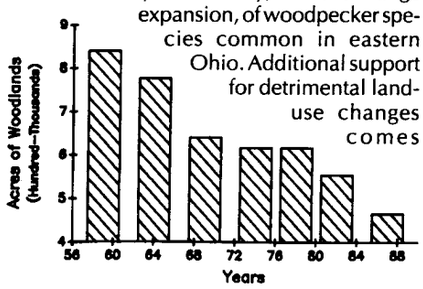
DeGraaf, R.M. and Shigo, A. L. 1985. Managing cavity trees for wildlife in the Northeast. Gen. Tech. Report NE-101. Broomall, PA. USDA Forest Service, Northeast Forest Experiment Station. 21 pp.

Mills, L.J. and K. Russell. 1980. Detection and correction of hazard trees in Washington's recreation areas: A how-to guide for recreation site managers. DNR Report No. 42. State Of Washington Department of Natural Resources. 37 pp.

Decline of Red-headed Woodpeckers in Ohio Continued

dominant to most other woodpecker species. Thus, competition from other cavity-nesting woodpeckers can be ruled out as the cause of their decline. No substantial increase in the number of predators in the breeding range of the red-head has occurred and it is unlikely to be responsible for broad declines.

Elimination of predatory and competitive factors leaves habitat changes. There is a general reforestation trend in Ohio as well as most of the East Coast of the U.S.; more acres of Ohio are forested now than were forested in the late 1800's. Statistics gathered by the Department of Agriculture indicate that this reforestation trend is not universal across Ohio. Although the eastern counties have become reforested, I found a continued, dramatic decrease in the acreage of woodlots on farms in the western half of the state (Figure 2). The persistent loss of woodlands in the western part of Ohio is most likely responsible for a decline in the state's red-headed woodpeckers. Habitat-induced changes are corroborated by the stability, and even range expansion, of woodpecker species common in eastern Ohio. Additional support for detrimental land-use changes comes from the observation of increasing eastern and decreasing western red-head populations.



Western Ohio is largely composed of privately-held lands. Thus, responsibility for the conservation of Ohio red-headed woodpeckers falls directly on its rural citizens. There is no strong economical argument for conserving the woodpecker. However, for those who have witnessed this bird, its sheer beauty lends enough credence for its existence. The redheaded woodpecker is as much a part of the history of Ohio as is agricultural development. Rural land-owners are often appreciative of all aspects of the land's history. By initiating and supporting private wildlife-oriented management plans, Backyard Tree Farmers could accomplish species conservation goals that traditionally have involved governmental intervention. Retention of snags and food trees (oaks, beeches) in woodpecker-inhabited woodlots is a first step in conserving this species. Additionally, maintenance of forested tracts on the property of all types of farmers would greatly stave off further population declines. The plight of the red-headed woodpecker is but one example where the marriage of cultural and environmental conservation is needed to provide future generations with a history worth leaving.

(Brad A. Andres is a graduate student in the Ohio Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, The Ohio State University.)