

VOLUNTEER

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He, he, he, he, he He, he, he, he, he

And with that he announced his return.

Pileated woodpeckers disappeared from Southern Michigan shortly after the logging and wildfires at the turn of the 20th century. Pileateds prefer older growth, drier woods—a rare commodity in post-settlement Southern Michigan. Five generations of Michiganders growing up south of Saginaw Bay lived in a world without the pileated, the inspiration for Walter Lantz’s cartoon creation “Woody the woodpecker.”

I observed pileated woodpeckers several times in the Upper Peninsula in the 1970s, and later in the Northern Lower Peninsula. But I had been waiting many years for my first Southern Michigan sighting. Naturalists knew pileateds were moving eastward down the Grand River and Maple River systems. In May I saw my first chisel-bill in the Rose Lake Wildlife Area (Clinton County). And in June a pileated woodpecker entertained my wife and me in our own backyard (Shiawassee County). His return ticket to Shiawassee County had been punched.

The Great Lakes region was covered with primeval forests in 1800. The settlers coming here all carried sharp axes and ambitions to make the wilderness productive. The virgin timber they felled built their homes and provided heat for them. The wildlife of these vast forests seemed boundless, enough to feed an emerging nation.

By the 1850s swamps were being drained and the forests cleared for the plow. Animal species dependent on large trees would suffer the most losses, but none more than the saw-whet owl, marten and the pileated woodpecker.

The pileated woodpecker is North America’s largest chisel bill, if you discount the possibility of the ivory-billed still existing in southern swamps. “Sir pileated” is almost the size of a crow and is known for its calling card—large, deep, rectangular diggings, usually low on dead and dying trees. This is a place where you would find carpenter ants—the pileateds’ favorite food.

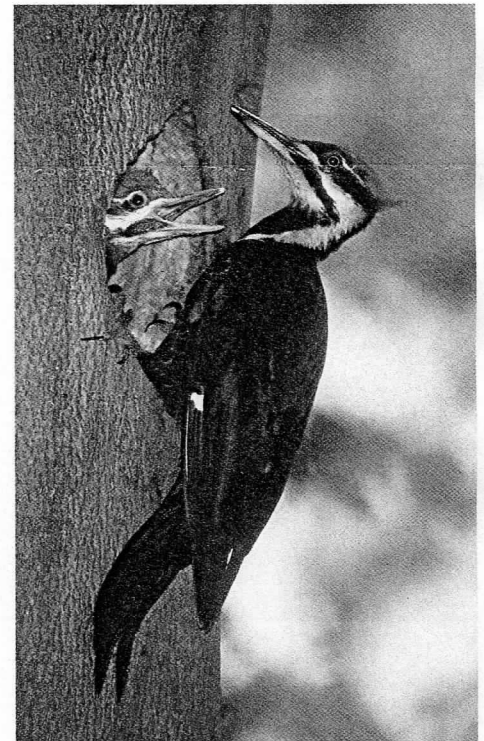
The early settlers and loggers knew the

pileated well, referring to him by many names—log-cock, wood cock, great black woodpecker, cock of the woods, wood hen. The loggers in particular referred to him fondly as thunder cock, owing to his raucous presence. When they could hear “thunder cock” in the distance they knew big timber lay ahead.

When the big timber was gone so was the woodpecker. By 1900 he was rare in Southern Michigan, probably limited to the rugged terrain of the Lake Michigan dunes and the lowland riverine forests of the Kalamazoo and St. Joseph Rivers, in Southwest Michigan. Barrows in his 1912 book “Michigan Bird Life” recounted some of the last sightings in Southern Michigan: one taken at Bangor, Van Buren County, in the autumn of 1897, by Frank H. Shuver; one seen at Ann Arbor March 1, 1899 (Chas L. Cass); two taken near Greenville, Montcalm County, in 1896 by Percy Selous; and two taken near Okemos, Ingham County in 1905 (Barrows). It is presumed “taken” meant killed. Professor Barrows was the curator of the General Museum at Michigan Agricultural College (later becoming Michigan State University). John Baumgartner, of Grand Ledge, has studied pileateds for decades. He believes birds were killed in the late 1800s to be sold to museums and collectors. This was a period before birds were protected.

No doubt pileateds were eaten by settlers because of their large size, like flickers, robins and blackbirds were. My limited Michigan research

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Pileated woodpeckers are quite hard to find during their nesting season. Photo Courtesy Steve Sage.

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Pileated Woodpecker

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uncovered no reviews of “thunder cock” as table fare, but the settlers ate everything.

In the Northern Lower Peninsula the pileated remained abundant until the lumber barons came for Michigan’s white pine to rebuild Chicago after the great fire of 1871. Between 1870-1920 enough white pine was cut from Michigan forests to cover the entire state with a board 1” thick, and have enough wood left over to cover the state of Rhode Island with a similar board. The loss of Northern Michigan’s forest treasure forced the pileated to retreat to the hardwoods and swamps that remained.

The Upper Peninsula pileateds fared better because of the vastness of the hardwood forests and swamps. There they remained an uncommon bird, but known to all. The Upper is probably where many Michiganders, like me, got their first glimpse of the pileated woodpecker.

The history of Michigan’s thunder cock is very closely tied to the management of our forests. The bird went from being common throughout the state to disappearing in the South. And while we anguished over the plight of Michigan’s wildlife the forest was re-growing.

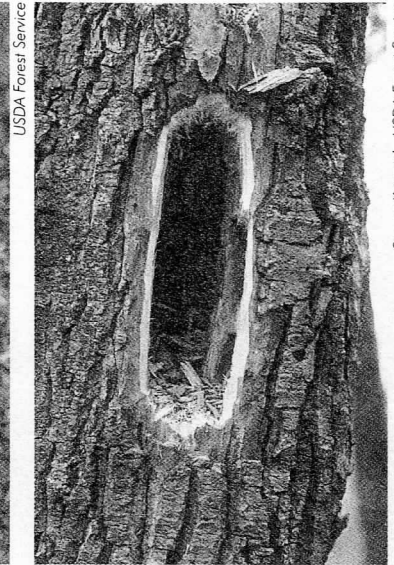
The often unnoticed phenomenon of forest-growth is called succession. It occurs on every piece of land, but succession is defined on a given tract by the soil and water regimen found there. Each piece of land is attempting to re-grow its most suitable vegetative cover. The suitable cover for most of Michigan soil/water conditions is forest. If man were to ignore a given tract of land long enough, the most suitable, best adapted, forest would grow. After most of Michigan was cleared of trees by settlers and lumber interests the forests attempted to re-grow. However, the forest was continually “set back” anywhere agricultural production was pursued.

Certain soil and water characteristics were good for farming as well as trees. Highly productive



Facts About Sir Pileated

- ◆ The pileated prefers mature forests.
- ◆ The pileateds favorite food is the carpenter ant.
- ◆ The pileated digs rectangular holes to find ants. Excavations can be so deep that small trees break in half.
- ◆ The pileated is an “ecosystem engineer.” Other birds and mammals depend on the cavities of the woodpecker for survival.
- ◆ Territory size ranges from 1,000 – 4,000 acres.
- ◆ A pileated pair stays on its territory year-round, but may tolerate “floaters” during the winter.
- ◆ The pileated sleeps in roost cavities. Roost trees have multiple entrance holes to allow for escape from predators.
- ◆ Predators of the pileated include: Northern goshawk, Cooper’s hawk, red-tailed hawk, great horned owl, marten, gray fox, barred owl, weasels, squirrels and the black ratsnake.



The pileated woodpecker is dependent on older-growth forest.

Pileateds make large, deep, rectangular feeding holes in trees.

PILEATED WOODPECKER BREEDING

- ◆ Lays one to six eggs, averaging four
- ◆ Both parents incubate eggs
- ◆ Both parents feed young
- ◆ Parents very quiet during nesting
- ◆ Young fledge within 30 days
- ◆ Young dependent on parents until September



agricultural soils stayed in farming while less productive soils couldn’t support a “family farm” and were abandoned by the mid 20th century. These areas re-grew to the forest cover most appropriate for the site. Fast forward 60 years, or more, and the forest recovery is obvious. Michigan today is growing almost three times as much wood as we are harvesting, meaning the trees are maturing in many places.

Added to that, our forests today are being managed by a cadre of professional foresters, with an eye toward sustainability. Foresters recognize the importance of the pileated woodpecker and all species. Today, most strive to accommodate woodpeckers in the forest by leaving 5-10 snags and rotted trees per acre on timber harvest operations.

We will never again make the mistakes of the past if we are wise enough to follow the principles of sound natural resource management. Forests are capable of producing wood, recreation, wildlife and aesthetics, all at the same time. And they also produce large amounts of oxygen. “Old growth” timber should be a planned component of our forest management system.

The recovery of Michigan’s forests provided a one-way ticket back to Southern Michigan for the pileated woodpecker. There may be other species just waiting to return home if given a chance.

Dennis Fijalkowski
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