

THE PILEATED WOODPECKER

By J. A. MUNRO

The Pileated Woodpecker—the aristocrat of the Woodpecker family—would fittingly serve as an emblem for our Canadian heritage of timbered solitudes. A permit by instinct, shunning the company of his lesser relatives, he seeks in lonely and quiet enjoyment the fastness of the heavy timber. Avoiding the constricted woodlot and the forests of coniferous second growth, he makes no truce with civilization and retreats to greater seclusion as the logging gang and scatty encroach upon his natural territory. Through the silence of the ancient woods his mating call resounds—a reverberating tattoo—while his echoing blows as he chisels into a tree for some boring grub arrest attention and the flash of vivid scarlet as he flies through the trees, momentarily vitalizing the wilderness, gives a pleasurable thrill to the fortunate traveller.

He is the largest of our Canadian Woodpeckers; the scarlet crest and white wing patches displayed conspicuously against the predominating black of his plumage serve to distinguish him from all other members of the family. The woodsman and the pioneer identify him by a variety of names the most popular being Logcock, Woodcock, and Redheaded Woodpecker. Such a plenitude of vernacular indicates the interest he creates—an interest that is apparent even among those in whom bird-life arouses no special enthusiasm.

Like many other species of Woodpecker the Pileated may be seen at all seasons of the year, but it is most likely that wintering birds are not the individuals present during the summer for there is a migratory movement in spring and autumn. During the winter they have their regular beats or patrols through certain stands of timber—patrols in the sense that the birds are acting as guardians of our timber, for they spend their lives in hunting down and destroying the boring grubs that menace our forests. When their day's work is over and their hunger satisfied the Woodpeckers retire to certain old nesting holes, where, secure from predatory animals and Horned Owls, they pass the long winter nights in warmth and safety. They reach their roosts early in the evening by the same route through the forest and at about the same time each day. Their approach is usually heralded by a loud, harsh Kak, Kak, Kak; a spirited cry of great carrying power that is seldom used during the day.

In southern British Columbia nesting begins early in May. The nest is a chiselled hole in a tree fourteen to eighteen inches deep, cut occasionally in a green cotton wood or poplar, more often in a dead pine or fir, and rarely in any but the tallest trees and at a considerable distance above the ground. On a cushion of fine chips three or four rose white eggs are laid. The young Woodpeckers are able to fly about the time the dog berries and other wild fruits are ripe, these forming a part of their food supply. Like many other birds that feed almost exclusively on insects, a certain amount of acid vegetable food is essential to their well being but under no conditions have they been known to attack cultivated fruit.

number of years both for breeding and roosting. Sometimes, however, flying squirrels will preempt them for their winter quarters, lining them with shredded bark or moss to the discomfort of the Woodpeckers. Again if the nesting trees are close to a mountain lake the holes may be used by Buffleheads and other tree-nesting Ducks, when a few years of decay have enlarged the openings sufficiently to allow the entrance of these larger birds. By providing these safe nesting sites the Pileated Woodpecker plays an important part in the conservation of certain valuable species of migratory game birds.

This bird feeds largely on the larvae or grubs of various species of barkbeetles, which are responsible for an enormous destruction of timber in our coniferous forests. The sately yellow pine, considered by many the most beautiful of our conifers, is particularly subject to the attack of these insects and a badly infested tree may be killed in two seasons. An extensive outbreak of Dendroctonus beetles in British Columbia during recent years has been checked and many million feet of valuable timber saved through the work of the Pileated Woodpeckers and their lesser relatives.

The larvae of wood borers, a group of beetles which attack felled timber, are also eagerly sought by this industrious forester. Wood-boring beetles of various genera lay their eggs in the bark of dead standing timber or in sawlogs that have been left in the woods and the sultan larvae bore into the sapwood where they make complicated gallery systems. The wood-dust manufactured during these excavations is ejected through various entrance tunnels in the bark and fall-groundward to accumulate in little heaps. This is the outward evidence that grubs are at work and the log or tree in process of dissolution. But should there also be saucer or cone shaped cavities in the bark of the infested tree, such marks indicate that the Pileated Woodpecker has arrived to save the situation.

During the winter months, when such insects are at the lowest ebb of their life cycle, the woodpecker work is particularly effective, as then they destroy the potential parents of a host of these pests. As wood-boring larvae carry on their destructive work under the bark or in the sapwood of the tree they are safe from other bird enemies. But the Woodpecker is equipped with highly specialized tools for climbing trees and for cutting into the wood in quest of its natural prey. Its strong, sturdy feet are provided with four powerful toes, two placed in front and two behind, and these enable the bird to cling securely to the bark of the tree during drilling operations. Its balance and rigidity is further maintained by the stiff quills in the tail which act as a brace against the tree. The bill, suggests a chisel in shape, and is so used, as, clinging securely to the bark with widespread toes and supported by the unbending tail, the Woodpecker delivers vigorous blows with its bill, while chips fly out and litter the ground below. Soon the chamber of the larvae is exposed and the insect drawn out and swallowed whole. The Woodpecker's tongue is, perhaps, more highly specialized than any other of its organs. It is long slender and nearly cylindrical; the upper surface furnished with small spines pointing backward, while the tip is a spear-point, hard as bone. In its structure and use the tongue suggests an Indian fish spear, or the tiny instrument used by a dental surgeon to remove a dead nerve from a molar. A more ingenious treatment for transfixing larvae can not be imagined. The insect is literally speared; the sharp spear the tough integuments, while the old nests may be used for the bird's grip and hold until the impaled insect is extracted.

The family of Woodpeckers as a whole enjoys comparative immunity from the aggression of mankind. They exhibit none of the qualities that would make them objects of sport and they are too small to be used for food. But the handsome conspicuous Pileated, never particularly common, has been so often the victim of the hunter's desire for a trophy that it has disappeared from many districts where conditions are suitable for its increase. In other localities it is fast approaching extinction. Usually it shows little fear of man and when its resounding tapping has drawn an observer within close range, the chiselling and hammering is continued heedless of the intruder. To the stranger in the woods, perhaps a sportsman on his annual deer hunt, the sight of this powerful, flame-colored bird makes an irresistible appeal. Possibly it is the first large bird seen by the hunter in the lonely autumn woods. Perhaps he has heard it spoken of by its universal and incorrect name of Woodcock. In any case it has an attraction that few other birds offer and far too often the hunter has covered the handsome bird as a memento of his vacation. This desire, however, must be restrained, otherwise, the bird would be lost to the forest, but an illegal act would be committed. The killing or possession of this bird is prohibited at all times by the Migratory Birds Convention Act and by the provincial laws. If these splendid birds, so characteristic of our northern forests are to be preserved, sportsmen must not only refrain from killing them, but must cooperate in their protection.

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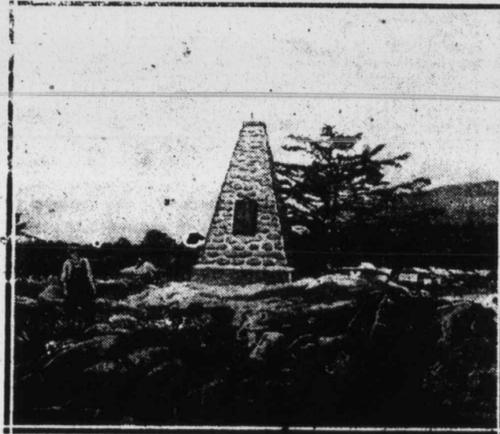


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Historic Site at Friendly Cove, B.C.



The historic past of the Nootka section of the West Coast was recalled recently when Lieutenant-Governor Walter C. Nichol, of British Columbia, unveiled and dedicated a monument commemorating the explorations of those great English navigators, Captain Cook and Captain Vancouver. The monument was built under the auspices of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada which is placing similar memorials across the Dominion on sites hallowed by interesting chapters of Canadian history. A large party travelled on the Canadian Pacific S.S. Princess Maquinna for the ceremony and left the steamer at the cannery wharf, boarding launches for the short run to Friendly Cove. The party included Lieutenant-Governor Nichol, H. J. S. Muskett, his secretary, Judge Howay and Mr. Forsyth, Dr. C. S. Newcombe, the well-known historical authority who wrote the "Circumnavigation of Vancouver Island." Prof. W. N. Sage of the University of British Columbia, Mrs. R. B. Meldick, representing the I.O.D.E., Mrs. and Miss Howay, Thomas Deacy, late Indian agent for the Queen Charlotte agency and a pioneer of 1859, Dr. David Donald, Mrs. Cave-Browne-Cave, and Professor Macmillan Brown, chancellor of the University of New Zealand. Dr. Macmillan Brown is one of the leading ethnologists of the Pacific, and has been spending the summer on the coast investigating the Indians and their customs. The new monument is seven feet broad by eleven feet high, with a standard size bronze tablet bearing the following inscription: "Nootka Sound, discovered by Capt. Cook, in March, 1778. In June, 1789, Spain took possession and established and maintained a settlement until 1795. The capture of British vessels in 1799 almost led to war, which was avoided by the Nootka Convention, 1799. Vancouver and Quadra met here in August, 1782, to determine the land to be restored under the convention." A feature of the entertainment provided those who took part in the unveiling ceremony was the Indian dancing, arranged by aborigines from Clayoquot Sound, the Wisconsin of the early navigators' journals. Tentative plans are afoot for an elaborate pageant to be held at Friendly Cove, Nootka Island, in four years time to celebrate the 150th anniversary of events commemorated by the unveiling of the cairn.

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