



Wildlife Tree Stewardship Program – Okanagan-Similkameen TARGET SPECIES FACTSHEET

The Wildlife Tree Stewardship Program, also known as WiTS, is a voluntary program that conserves wildlife tree habitats through volunteer monitoring (of wildlife trees and bird activity), landowner agreements, and community education. It was first established on Vancouver Island through the Federation of BC Naturalists and has recently expanded to include the Lower Mainland and Okanagan-Similkameen. In the Okanagan-Similkameen, WiTS will focus on five bird species at risk. This fact sheet introduces one of our regions target species, the White-headed Woodpecker. By recording all sightings of this woodpecker, WiTS aims to assist its recovery and help protect its habitat.



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White-headed Woodpecker

What is a White-headed Woodpecker?

White-headed Woodpeckers (*Picoides albolarvatus*) are one of the most distinctive local woodpeckers. Their white head and throat, and white wing patches sharply contrast with their black bodies. White-headed Woodpeckers are considered **Federally Endangered** due to small population size, restricted range, a dependency on Ponderosa Pine seeds, and loss and degradation of habitat. In Canada, this woodpecker is known to breed only in the southern Okanagan Valley as far north as Naramata.

SIMILAR SPECIES:

- **CLARK'S NUTCRACKER** (*Nucifraga columbiana*). This jay also has a white head and white wing patches, but it is a much larger bird (30-33cm) and has a grey body.



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DESCRIPTION:

- Black bodied woodpecker with white wing patches and a distinctive white head (the only local woodpecker with a white head). Males have a flash of red on the back of the head.
- Body Length: 24 cm;
- Vocal call sounds like; “chik-a-chik, chik-a-chik”

DIET:

- Predominately pine seeds. Insects are consumed only during nesting. Insect food includes ants, wood-boring beetles, spiders and fly larvae. May also forage on the flower heads of mullein, an introduced invasive plant.

HABITAT:

- Open park-like mature old Ponderosa Pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) forests with large-diameter decaying trees for both nesting and roosting, and abundant seed cones for food.
- Require a high wildlife tree density (5 per hectare); they often excavate more than one nest in more than one tree before laying a clutch.
- Nests are found most often in more decayed, large diameter wildlife trees (> 40 cm diameter at breast height). In BC nest cavities have been found 2.4m to 9m above the ground.
- Nests have also been found in Douglas-fir trees (*Pseudotsuga menziesii* var. *glauca*) and Western Larch (*Larix occidentalis*).

How can I help White-headed Woodpeckers?



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Habitat Restoration

More than fifty years of selective logging of large Ponderosa Pine trees and fire suppression have resulted in dramatic habitat changes. Logging has removed the large pines and fire suppression has allowed the establishment of dense stands of immature pine as well as the more shade tolerant Douglas-fir. The result is increased fuel loads that increase the potential for more severe fires, destroying any remaining mature trees and the large wildlife trees. With the increase in density of immature trees comes increased competition for nutrients, fewer pine seeds, few or no dead standing trees, and a gradual change from a climax forest dominated by Ponderosa Pine to one dominated by Douglas-fir. Mature and old growth forests have also been lost to urban and agricultural development. Even current selective logging practices require the falling of some wildlife trees for safety reasons. Wildlife trees are also cut for firewood, despite permit regulations restricting their cutting.

You can help improve White-headed Woodpecker habitat by:

- conserving existing mature and old growth stands of Ponderosa Pine with a high density of large diameter wildlife trees.
- retaining standing dead trees wherever it is safe to do so. Some wildlife trees can remain standing for more than 40 years. Slightly decayed living trees with large diameters should also be retained.
- retaining large coarse woody debris for small wildlife.
- using manual thinning of young trees and, if feasible, low-intensity burning, to manage forests to produce more open habitats (i.e. 20-50% canopy closure) with healthier trees and understory vegetation. This results in increased cone production and reduces densities of shade-tolerant Douglas-fir, mimicking the natural cycling of this ecosystem.
- incorporating these improvements into a plan to reduce the fire hazard on your property. Enhancing even a portion of your property can help.

Did you know?

Contrary to the common characteristic of pecking directly at wood, the White-headed Woodpecker flakes and chips bark away with angled strokes while foraging for insects. It also slashes to open cones for seeds. White-headed Woodpeckers land on tree trunks and branches upside down.

Monitoring

- White-headed Woodpeckers are a year-round resident. Breeding occurs during May and eggs (clutch size 4-5 eggs) are present by late-May to June.



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For more information on WiTS:

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To report woodpecker sightings:

Bird Studies Canada: (250) 496-4049, or
Partners in Flight BC/Yukon at (250) 490-8286



South Okanagan-Similkameen
Stewardship Program



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