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Exploring Our Little Corner of the World with the Galiano Naturalists

by Nathan Gaylor

The Pileated woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*) is the largest remaining woodpecker of North America (41-50 cm). The genus comes from a combination of two Greek words, *drys* (a tree) and *kopis* (a cleaver or dagger). The species name is Latin meaning "capped," which refers to the red and black crest on this woodpecker's head. The red on the crest of the male extends from the base of the bill to the rear of the head; only the rear half of the female's crest is scarlet. You have probably seen this large bird with its



flaming red head flying through Galiano's forests in its distinct pattern of fluid thrusts upward followed by an occasional sinking motion which is thwarted by the next pulse of wings. You may have heard this bird's distinct call, a wild and loud *kak kak kak kak* echoing through the forest. Or you might have heard a rhythmical

hammering indicating foraging activity as a bird searches for wood boring insects located in the stems of decaying trees or creating nesting cavities. Upon closer inspection one is able to watch these birds as

they appear to listen to the stem of trees, flying from one to another until they locate a source of food such as juicy carpenter ants.

The pileated woodpecker is often referred to as a keystone species or a species linked with the perseverance of an array of other species. This is because they are "primary cavity nesters" or create large holes in live and dead trees (wildlife trees) to find food and nesting sites. The woodpecker excavates fist-sized rectangular cavities, and then uses its extremely long, sticky tongue to reach the insects within the cavity. The feeding excavations of a Pileated Woodpecker are so extensive that they often attract other birds to feed. These excavations can be so broad and deep that they can cause small trees to break in half. Every year each breeding pair of woodpeckers (they mate for life) excavates a new cavity for nesting and lays 3-5 white eggs. These cavities are abandoned annually and then used for shelter or nesting by a wide variety of other birds as well as providing habitat for plants, insects, and mammals. A Pileated Woodpecker pair stays together on its territory all year round. It will defend the territory in all seasons, but will tolerate trespassers during the winter.

Pileated woodpeckers have shown to require specific tree sizes and forest types when selecting for nesting cavities. The Pileated Woodpecker prefers large trees for nesting. In young forests, it will use any large trees remaining from before the forest was cut. This can be a limiting factor in population numbers. In one American study published in the *Journal of Wildlife Management* 66(2) 2002, Aubry and Raley found trees selected for nesting ranged between 65 – 154 cm's DBH (diameter at breast height; breast height = 1.3 meters above point of germination) and selected trees between 155 – 309 cm's DBH for

roosting. A roosting bird requires a larger tree because the roost cavity must have multiple entrances to escape predators.

Many of the life forms in Galiano Island's forests depend on the pileated woodpecker to provide habitat for them. This extremely important species is an essential component of our ecosystem. With a little bit of forethought we should be able to provide for their requirements, standing dead trees, or "snags". Ensuring the persistence of large snags will insure the persistence of pileated woodpeckers, and all their associated life forms.

The Galiano Naturalists welcome new participants to join us in learning more about our natural environment.

Please contact Pam at 539-3322 or by email (galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com) for more information.