

Pecking problem: Protect trees from hole-boring birds

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, April 24, 2020

Q: Several of my fruit trees have a ring of small holes around the trunk. The ring stretches completely around the trunk and is several inches wide. Do you know what might be the cause and if it kills the tree?

A: What you are describing sounds like sapsucker damage. The series of small evenly-spaced holes in rows pecked through the bark on the trunk or limb of your trees is caused by a sapsucker seeking food. The damage is often the worst during the spring, as this is breeding season when the birds capture the sap to feed to their young. Over time, this continuous activity extends the number of rows of holes.



A red-breasted sapsucker moves up the trunk of a tree searching the drilled holes for sap and insects at Poulsbo's Raab Park on Monday, March 2, 2020. Red-breasted sapsuckers drill the small holes in the tree bark and then return later to feed on the sap that oozes out and the insects that are attracted to the sap. (Photo: MEEGAN M. REID / KITSAP SUN)

Most trees can tolerate these feeding holes if they are provided adequate water and fertilizer. But on occasion, they can kill a limb or allow disease pathogens to enter the limb, which then causes the demise of the tree. In some cases, I have seen damage severe enough to kill the tree or shrub.

Sapsuckers are related to woodpeckers and flickers; they all belong to the family Picidae. Woodpeckers can also occasionally cause damage to tree trunks if they are feeding on bores or other insects that are attacking the tree. More often, woodpeckers and flickers will cause damage to fences or structures, especially ones made of stucco or wood.

Physical exclusion is the best strategy for limiting damage caused by woodpeckers and sapsuckers.



The holes show sapsucker damage to a blue ghost eucalyptus. (Photo: SUBMITTED)

Tree trunks and branches can be protected from excessive damage by wrapping the area with hardware cloth, a stiff wire mesh found at hardware stores, where damage is the worst. If this strategy is used, be sure that the hardware cloth does not cause greater damage to the tree by girdling the branch or rubbing off the bark.

When wrapping the wire around the tree, include spacers, such as pieces of wood or PVC pipe, between the bark and the wire so the bird cannot just peck through the holes in the wire.

On structures, install bird-type netting to prevent woodpeckers from gaining access to wood siding or stucco. Lightweight, plastic 3/4-inch mesh is stretched from the eaves to a lower point on the building. Alternatively, the netting can be used over any flat surface subject to damage, such as a fence post. Be sure to leave at least three inches of space between the netting and damaged surface so the birds cannot cause further damage through the mesh.

Once established, woodpeckers are persistent and not easily driven from their territory or selected pecking site.

University research has found that bird-frightening devices, such as models of hawks, owls or snakes, are ineffective against these birds. Other scare devices like plastic twirlers, aluminum foil and brightly-colored plastic strips are found to have inconsistent success.

More expensive devices that utilize predator calls from hawks and other birds of prey only seem to work if the bird has not become fixated on that particular location.



This Red-breasted Sapsucker was spotted in Reno in January, 2015. (Photo: Paul Hurtado/Contributed to the RGJ)

Chemical repellents are rarely successful, but for woodpeckers and sapsuckers, Tanglefoot, a sticky substance, can be effective but it is very messy.

For additional information on these birds and how to control the damage they cause, check out these links:

- University of Arkansas' Agricultural program: <https://bit.ly/2Vu6qeR>
- University of California's Pest Notes: <https://bit.ly/2S1VHWV>
- Colorado State University's information on preventing woodpecker damage: <https://bit.ly/3axYhKu>

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.