

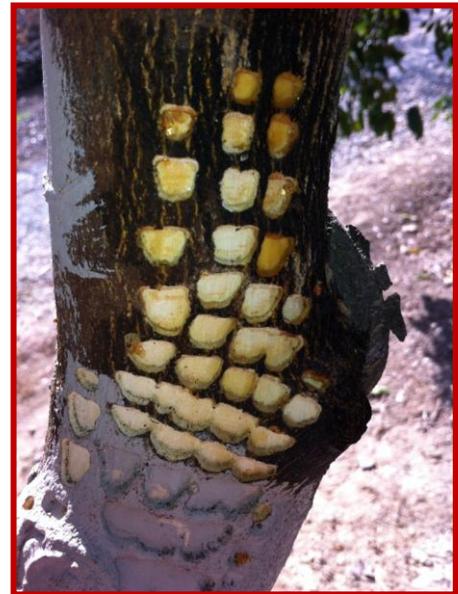


Sapsuckers Lifestyle Causes Tree Damage

by Michelle Le Strange, UC Master Gardener

Every so often an unusual home garden problem shows up in the Master Gardener office. Recently a couple from Three Rivers brought in a photo of a citrus tree that was riddled with damage. Several one inch “squares” of bark had been removed from the tree’s trunk. It looked as if someone had used a knife and excised the bark because the edges were so clean. The pattern was fairly regular and occurred on the trunk a couple of feet above the ground. What could be causing the problem?

At first we thought it might be rodents like mice or rats, or squirrels or raccoons, or even deer. All of these critters are common in the foothills and can cause feeding damage to trees, but we had to rule them out because the damage was so atypical and the squares were so regular in pattern. Then the couple mentioned that other deciduous trees on their property also had stripes and rings of small holes up higher on their trunks. That was the clue that the culprit was the “Yellow Bellied Sapsucker”.



Unusually large damage caused by the yellow-bellied sapsucker on a citrus tree in Three Rivers

Sapsuckers, flickers, and woodpeckers are all members of the American woodpecker family of migratory birds. At least 17 species are found in California and at least two of them are on its endangered species list. In general woodpeckers range in size from 7 to 14 inches in length and have bright contrasting colors of red, black and white markings.

Part of a woodpecker's breeding behavior is an incessant rhythmic tapping or repetitive drumming on wood or other hard surfaces using the bill as a way of proclaiming breeding territory and social significance. Woodpeckers prefer drumming surfaces that resonate loudly. They frequently bypass wood and use metal gutters and downspouts, or metal rooftop ventilators. Both male and female woodpeckers drum. This activity may be annoying to household residents, especially if it starts in the early morning hours.

Acorn woodpeckers place numerous acorns in holes they drill in buildings, wooden fence posts, utility poles, and old tree snags. The acorn woodpecker may also take a quicker approach and

wedge acorns beneath wooden shakes or shingles and, in the process, be very destructive. Acorn woodpeckers may accumulate and store hundreds to thousands of acorns in a single season.

Sapsuckers are a group of woodpeckers that peck holes in trees and larger woody shrubs, feeding on the bark, sap and insects drawn to the sap. It relies more on the plant sap than insects for its diet. Typically these holes are not harmful, but some trees may die if holes are extensive enough to girdle the trunk or stem. The sample we saw was quite harmful and there is a good chance that the tree will die.



Yellow-bellied sapsucker (male).

The identifying field markings of adult yellow-bellied sapsucker birds (*Sphyrapicus varius*) are a black crescent on the breast, pale yellow belly, white wing stripe, and a crimson crown. The male also has a crimson chin and throat, distinguishing him from the female whose chin and throat are white. More than 250 species of woody plants are known to be attacked throughout the United States.

Early in the spring the sapsucker tests many trees around its selected nesting site by making sample drillings before selecting the trees it prefers. These trees, because of quantity or sugar content of the

sap, are visited several times a day for the rest of the season and sometimes are used as a food source for several years. Sapsuckers chisel a hole then they insert their brush-like tongues and drink the sap produced by the tree. Afterwards they chisel a new hole on top of the old hole creating a vertical line of holes. When the sap flow in each column of holes is exhausted, the bird moves to make another column of holes, and so on. Puncture wounds and resulting sap flow on branches and trunks of trees are the most obvious symptoms of injury inflicted by the sapsucker.

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act and Federal and State regulations prohibit shooting of sapsuckers. About all you can do to keep a sapsucker or woodpecker away is to screen off the area they are pecking. To discourage sapsuckers from feeding on a favorite shade tree, wrap hardware cloth, netting or burlap around the area being tapped or smear a sticky repellent material, such as bird tanglefoot, on the bark. Visual frightening devices (aluminum foil, fake owls, etc.) and noise makers offer some success, but the birds can get used to them. Combining all of these techniques might just discourage the birds from setting up home in your yard.



Typical damage caused by yellow-bellied sapsucker.

April 4, 2013