

Pesky Woodpeckers!

-and ways to deter them

It is that time of year again!

The time where pesky woodpeckers are looking for prime real estate to build their nest... aka: your house! The TRU is receiving call after call from worried (read: irate!) home-owners who are having the façades of their houses pecked apart.

More often than not most of us enjoy seeing the two endemic subspecies of woodpeckers which belong to Grand Cayman; the West Indian Woodpecker (*Melanerpes superciliaris caymanensis*) and the Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus gundlachi*). However, during nesting season (January to August, but mainly April and May), the woodpeckers are increasingly favouring houses over natural nest sites, especially houses with façades built of Styrofoam blocks with a marmoran finish! Natural habitats, such as living and dead tree cavities (Black Mangroves, Royal Palms and Silver Thatch palms in particular) are getting increasingly scarce in most areas on island and the Styrofoam makes for easy excavation. Males exacerbate the problem by “drumming” on resonate surfaces such as metal gutters in territorial displays, thus adding psychological hassle to the home-owner as well!

Like all wild birds in the Cayman Islands (with exception of game birds), woodpeckers are fully protected under the NCL. It is therefore a criminal offence to kill, disturb or move birds and/or nest sites. Furthermore, woodpeckers are highly territorial and will likely either return to the site if moved or new birds will move in to your attractive territory.



West Indian Woodpecker
(*Melanerpes superciliaris caymanensis*)
at the top and the Northern Flicker
(*Colaptes auratus gundlachi*) below.

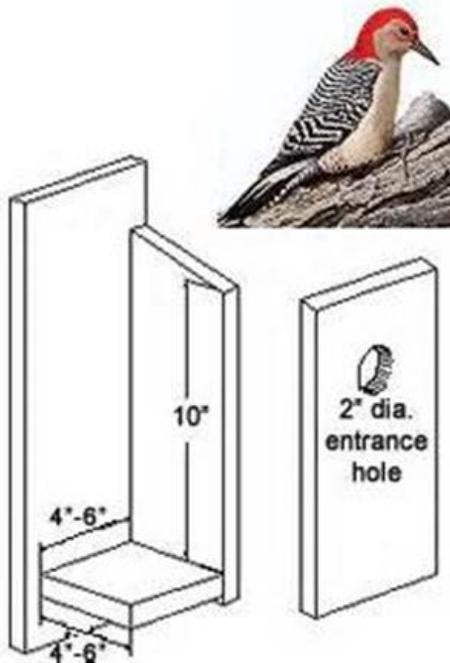
Images are from the DoE's

[Virtual Bird Guide](#)

Methods of deterrent

So how do you alleviate the pressure of these birds on your house and your emotions?

Well, seen through our eyes your best bet is to offer the woodpeckers an alternative home. If you haven't already cleared your land, perhaps consider leaving a few old and even dead trees on your property. Woodpeckers are (as you know by now!) not picky and are often seen moving into abandoned bat boxes and similarly constructed nesting facilities. This not only allows humans and birds to live side by side as is necessary on a small island, but the presence of birds also serve to "occupy" the territory and keep other birds at bay. The TRU is currently building woodpecker houses to conduct a pilot study on their efficacy.



Example of nest box building guidelines:
<http://www.beautyofbirds.com/redbelliedwoodpeckernestbox.html>

Secondly, your choice of building material for your own house is paramount. Alternatives to Styrofoam façades and tougher coatings will alleviate this problem altogether, although this is probably of limited use if your house is currently being pecked apart. When considering actual deterrents to existing damage, timing is everything. It is important to start deterring birds as soon as they show an interest in your house. As they become more established the job only gets harder and early signs of holes should be filled and painted immediately. Once a female has laid eggs in a cavity of your house the bird should be left alone to raise her chicks. TRU has borrowed a fiber optics camera to investigate current excavations for eggs, see below.



Jessica Harvey from TRU using a fiber optics camera to check for eggs in an excavated nest cavity in the eave of her house!

Other than filling and painting emerging holes, there are quite a variety of deterrent suggestions –the most helpful of which are listed below. Please note that using them in combination will be the most effective!

Visual deterrents

Shiny, metal objects moving in the breeze have proved effective as reflective light is a nuisance to the birds. Hanging CD's aluminum foil strips or reflective tape (e.g. [Irri-Tape from Bird-X](#)) are widely used to repel birds. The movement in the breeze provides continual stimulus triggering the birds' innate behavioral responses and thus prevent birds from becoming habituated to the deterrent.



Reflective tape strips hanging in front of areas prone to damage.

Sound deterrents

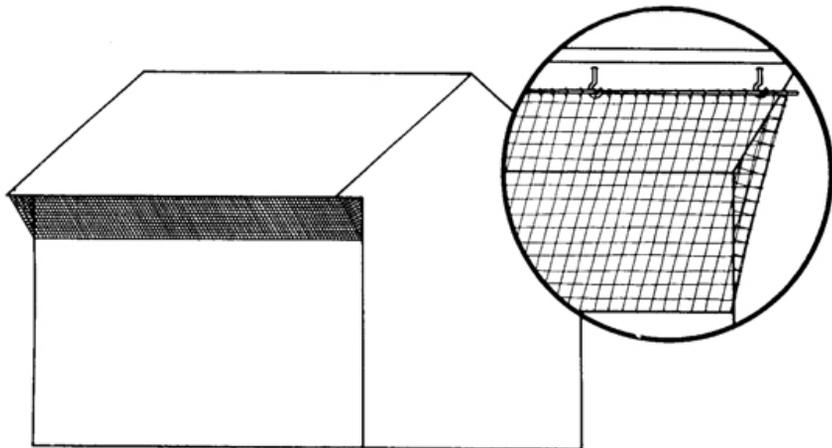
TRU has obtained an audio file with a woodpecker distress call followed by a predator (hawk) call. To prevent birds from becoming conditioned to this type of deterrent it should be played irregularly and used in combination with other deterrents. If you are interested in obtaining the MP3 file please contact the editor, see page 2.

Physical barriers

Bird spikes can be used on ledges and façades and bird netting can be used where woodpeckers are excavating under eaves. Lightweight nylon or plastic netting of 3/4 inch can be attached to overhanging eaves, with a minimum of 3 inches between the net and the side of the building to avoid the bird reaching through it. Make sure the birds cannot get behind the netting and secure each end accordingly! See below.

What NOT to do!

The TRU strongly advise against sticky toxic repellents and paints as these probably stain your house and can damage and entangle the birds plumage. Also, these treatments are often developed for colder climates and may run in warm weather, leaving streaky marks on your façade.



Bird-netting attached by hooks from overhanging eaves and secured taut (but not too tight) to the side of the building. The netting is barely visible from a distance and will offer a long-term solution to your woodpecker problem. Reference:

<http://icwdm.org/handbook/birds/Woodpeckers/WoodpeckersDamageControl.aspx>