

# Identifying and Mitigating Plant Damage Caused by the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

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Woodpeckers cause various types of damage to plants, trees, and even human structures. Several species of woodpeckers are present in Kentucky, and damage varies with species. One species of woodpecker that creates a rather unique type of damage is the yellow-bellied sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varus*), which overwinters in Kentucky and then migrates north in spring.

## Natural History and Identification

Yellow-bellied sapsuckers are a migrating member of the woodpecker family. They reside in Kentucky from mid-late October through beginning of April. During the summer months, they breed in the northern United States, as well as southern to northern Canada. The bird is slightly larger than an American robin, with a large head and long beak. The body appears mostly white, with a black back, tail, and wings. There are some white feathers occurring in a bar pattern on the wing and tail, giving a slightly speckled appearance. On both males and females, the top of the head has a large red patch; males also have red on their throat while females have white feathers in this location (Figure 1).

Sapsuckers' diet consists primarily of xylem and phloem sap that accumulates within the holes created on branches and trunks. This is different from other members of the woodpecker family, who tend to feed upon insects located within plants. Sap is not the sole source of their nutritional needs. In addition to sap they consume fruit, insects, and spiders.

Ecologically, sapsuckers and other woodpeckers create habitat for many other species within the ecosystems in which they reside. Other species of birds may feed on the sap the sapsuckers



Figure 1. Male yellow-bellied sapsucker (left; Elmer Verhasselt, Bugwood.org) on a pecan tree; notice the red throat. Female yellow-bellied sapsucker (right; Royal Tyler, Pro Pest and Lawn Store, Bugwood.org); notice the white throat. Bars of white feathers on wings and tail give a speckled appearance.

make available within their wells. As with other woodpeckers, the cavities created by sapsuckers for their own breeding are often utilized by many other species once sapsuckers leave the area.

## Legal Status

Yellow-bellied sapsuckers, like the other woodpecker species found in Kentucky, are a federally protected species under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. Special permits that allow the "take" of woodpeckers may be issued under special circumstances. These permits are issued through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Agency, as well as through the United States Department of Agriculture, Animal Health Inspection Service (USDA APHIS) Wildlife Services. Activities or deterrents that do not harm individuals or their active nests are allowed.

## Damage Identification

Small clustered holes on tree bark are the primary identifiers of sapsuckers (Figure 2.). These holes generally appear in

lines and can be in clusters of one or two but there can be well over 100 located on a single tree. Sapsuckers may return to the same plant year after year and create new holes, usually located within the general proximity to previously created holes.

The group of holes is referred to as a sap well. These holes are usually between the size of a dime and a nickel, and are 1 or two cm deep. Sap is what carries the water, hormones, and important nutrients the trees needs for survival and growth. When a plant is damaged to the depth the sapsucker creates with its holes, sap will seep into the area created and pool, allowing for animals to consume it. Holes made in series, or lines, allow the birds to accumulate sap. Random holes on a tree or shrub are generally indicative of woodpeckers feeding upon insects within the wood.

Sapsuckers often are attracted to plants that are weak or stressed, even selecting branches near previously damaged sections of plants. They also display preferences for certain types of trees; for



Figure 2. Newly occurring yellow-bellied sapsucker damage in the form of sapwells occurring in horizontal lines on an eastern white pine. (Steven Katovich, USDA Forest Service, Bugwood.org). Long-term and repeated use by yellow-bellied sapsuckers can cause large areas of damage. (Chazz Hesselein, Alabama Cooperative Extension System, Bugwood.org).

example red maple (*Acer rubrum*) is selected more frequently than northern red oak (*Quercus rubra*).

## Damage Management and Deterrents

Sapsucker damage is mostly cosmetic and not a serious health problem. However, holes may allow other pests and pathogens to enter the tree. Unfortunately, woodpeckers are difficult to discourage from established feeding or drumming areas. (Drumming is the pecking on trees, telephone poles, or house siding to communicate their territory claims to other woodpeckers.) Homeowners and producers should inspect trees or shrubs for signs of recent damage indicative of a sapsucker. Depending on the level of damage or the value of the plant, a decision will need to be made regarding management; determine whether to prevent further damage or to allow the sapsucker to continue to utilize the holes it created or create more in the future.

The combination of or use of multiple methods at different times is generally a more successful strategy to solve the problem.

### Physical Exclusion

Damage that occurs repeatedly on one plant or tree may be prevented by wrapping a loose coarse material like burlap around damaged areas. This may either totally prevent access to the wells or provide enough discouragement to limit future use of the area. For shrubs or other smaller plants, bird netting placed over top of the plant can prevent access to the stems.

### Frightening Devices

There are multiple types of frightening device options that may decrease or eliminate the use of plants by sapsuckers. Predator decoys such as owls, hawks, or snakes may be helpful. Sound devices that emit loud noises or sounds of animals in distress may also be effective. Metal plates, pans, or streamers hung within the

birds' habitat have been shown to reduce sapsucker use. Targeting the placement of these items in the areas of damage may help discourage subsequent damage.

### Chemical Repellents

Tactile or sticky repellants applied to the stems or bark around damaged areas may help discourage the birds from landing and feeding or creating more holes. Toxicants are not an option due to federal protections.

## References and Other Resources

- Eberhardt, L.S. 2000. Use and selection of sap trees by yellow-bellied sapsuckers. *The Auk* 1117: 41-51.
- Marsh, R.E. 1994. Woodpeckers. IN: Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage. University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Pp E139-E145.