

# Woodpeckers and development coexist in Seattle

August 22 2018

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Pileated Woodpeckers peek from a tree cavity in suburban Seattle. Credit: J. Tomasevic

The two largest woodpeckers in North America, the Imperial Woodpecker and Ivory-billed Woodpecker, are believed to have gone extinct during the twentieth century. Can their surviving cousin, the Pileated Woodpecker, persist when standing dead trees and other crucial

resources are lost to urbanization? A new study published by *The Condor: Ornithological Applications* tracked birds in suburban Seattle and found that as long as tree cover remains above a certain threshold, Pileated Woodpeckers and housing developments can coexist.

The University of Washington's Jorge Tomasevic (now at the Universidad Austral de Chile) and John Marzluff trapped and radio-tagged 16 Pileated Woodpeckers at 9 sites with varying degrees of urbanization in suburban Seattle. Tracking each bird for about a year, they found that Pileated Woodpeckers used not only forested areas such as parks, but also lightly and moderately urbanized areas where some [trees](#) had been retained, taking advantage of resources such as backyard birdfeeders.

These results show that retaining at least 20% forest cover, including standing [dead trees](#), over large suburban areas may help sustain Pileated Woodpeckers and perhaps even other species tied to them. Despite potential risks from threats such as feral cats and collisions with windows, the researchers believe that cities can play an important role in the conservation of biodiversity.

"You'd think that such large bird would be easy to find, especially when carrying a transmitter, but they did a very good job hiding," says Tomasevic. "It was also very challenging to work in populated areas. I have so many anecdotes, good and bad, about dealing with people and people dealing with me doing my work. Some people were very friendly, but some were a little nervous with me walking around the neighborhood. I tried to look as official as possible, with University of Washington logos on my jacket, and I created a website for the project and printed some business cards. It was a great opportunity to do outreach, and I'm still friends with some of the neighborhood residents."

"As suburban sprawl becomes more and more ubiquitous, it's imperative

that we consider which specific yard features can be promoted to share our neighborhoods with wildlife," according to the University of Delaware's Desiree Narango, an expert on avian urban ecology. "This paper is a nice example showing that even a mature forest specialist can use and navigate the suburban landscape if we provide the resources they need: large trees and some retained wooded areas."

**More information:** "Use of suburban landscapes by the Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*)" *The Condor: Ornithological Applications* [DOI: 10.1650/CONDOR-17-171.1](https://doi.org/10.1650/CONDOR-17-171.1)

Provided by American Ornithological Society

Citation: Woodpeckers and development coexist in Seattle (2018, August 22) retrieved 17 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-08-woodpeckers-coexist-seattle.html>

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