

## Red-bellied woodpecker

### *Melanerpes carolinus*

The particular rat-a-tat-tat of the red-bellied woodpecker drum draws attention in the winter woods along the Chicago River. Predominantly found east of the Mississippi, the red-bellied woodpecker prefers moderate-density forests with larger trees or nesting cavities and dead trees, called snags, for hunting insects, an excellent source of nutrition. LaBagh Woods on the city's north side is home to a few.

Superficially similar to the northern flicker and ladder-backed woodpecker, its common name is somewhat misleading. You might expect this bird, with its flashy red cap and nape, to be called the red-headed woodpecker, but that name refers to *Melanerpes erythrocephalus* which has a completely red head. The red-bellied woodpecker has a subtle red patch on its belly that gives its name. Adults are generally light gray with a black and white pattern on their back, wings, and tail. The red feathers on the head are more prominent in adult males.

These birds have historically lived near rivers in Illinois as the rest of the state was covered in prairie. They nest in the decayed cavities of snags, tall stumps, or in live trees that have softer wood such as elms, maples, or willows. Snags are preferred as they house the woodpeckers' main food supply – insects, although these birds are omnivores and also eat fruits, nuts, and seeds. The dead, decaying wood supports a rich community of decomposers like bacteria, fungi, and insects. Snags have greater structural complexity than living trees providing shelter and food for woodpeckers, other birds, and bats. Additionally, cavities excavated by woodpeckers help support dozens of other species that help control insect populations, including non-native species like the emerald ash borer and gypsy moth.

Predators of adult red-bellied woodpeckers include sharp-shinned hawks and Cooper's hawks (also river-edge regulars), snakes and even house cats. When approached by a larger animal, red-bellied woodpeckers will either hide from it or harass it. They will defend their nests aggressively, even against much larger predators.

Next time you are out for a walk in the woods, look and listen for one of our native woodpeckers. They're a sight to behold.

