

Department of Environmental Conservation

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Red-headed Woodpecker

Scientific name: *Melanerpes erythrocephalus*

New York Status: **Special Concern**

Federal Status: Not Listed

Description

Unique and unmistakable among the woodpeckers, the red-headed woodpecker has a bright red hood covering its head, neck, throat, and upper breast. A medium-sized woodpecker, it measures 7 to 10 inches in length with a long, chisel-like bill. Sexes are similar with white under parts contrasting the back, tail, and wings which are black with a blue or greenish sheen. Distinctive white secondaries are visible in flight and at rest. The red-headed woodpecker juvenile has a brown neck and head in place of the red hood, and brown streaking on the rest of the body.

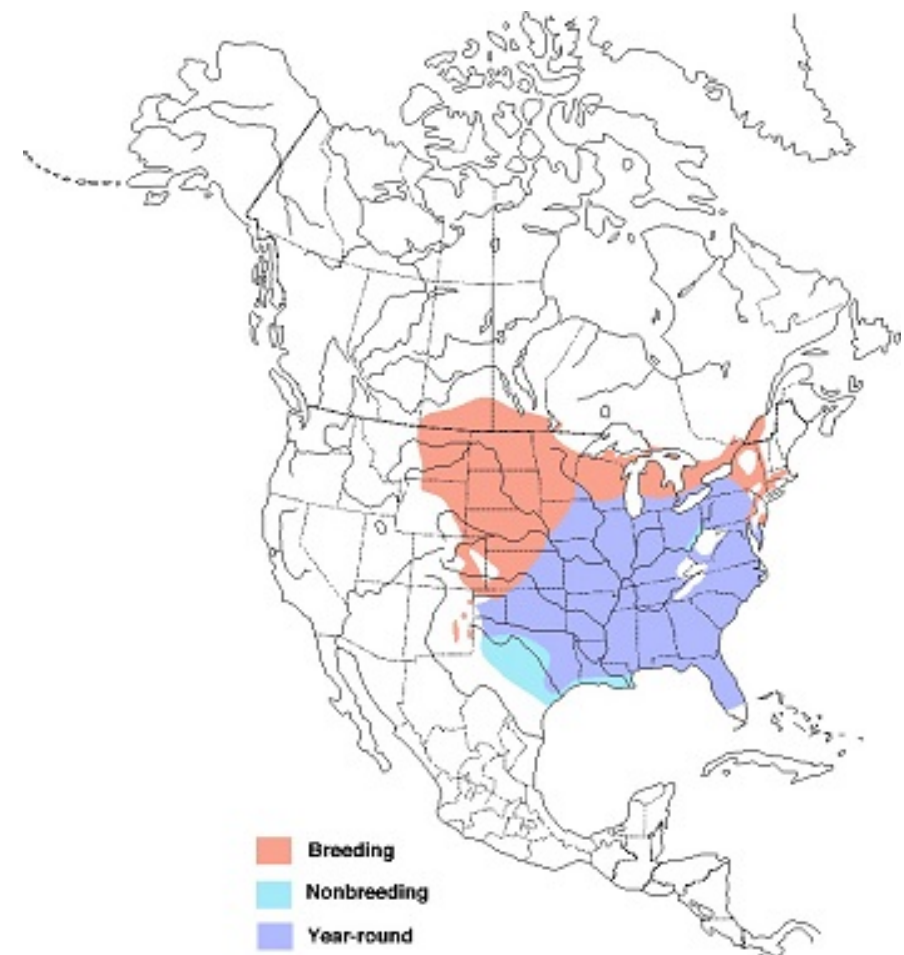


Photo by USGS

The red-headed woodpecker is noted for their clear, distinct call and boisterous demeanor in the field. Actively foraging, hopping from branch to branch, they are the most omnivorous of all North American woodpeckers and has a diverse diet of seeds, nuts, fruit, insects and animals such as nestlings and mice. Red-headed woodpeckers are noted for their unique food storage technique. They are one of only a few species of woodpeckers known to cache, or store, food in the winter and the only one to cover its food stores with bark.

Life History

The red-headed woodpecker is both sedentary and migratory within its breeding range. It nests in the cavities of dead trees up to 80 feet above the ground. The male selects the cavity site and both sexes share in building the nest and incubating the eggs. Clutch size is 4 to 8 eggs and parents will raise 1 or 2 broods per season. Incubation lasts 12 to 14 days and nestlings hatch completely naked and helpless. Young fledge at 27 to 30 days and will remain near the nest site until they are driven away by parents raising a second brood.



Red-headed woodpecker range map from *Birds of the World*, maintained by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Distribution and Habitat

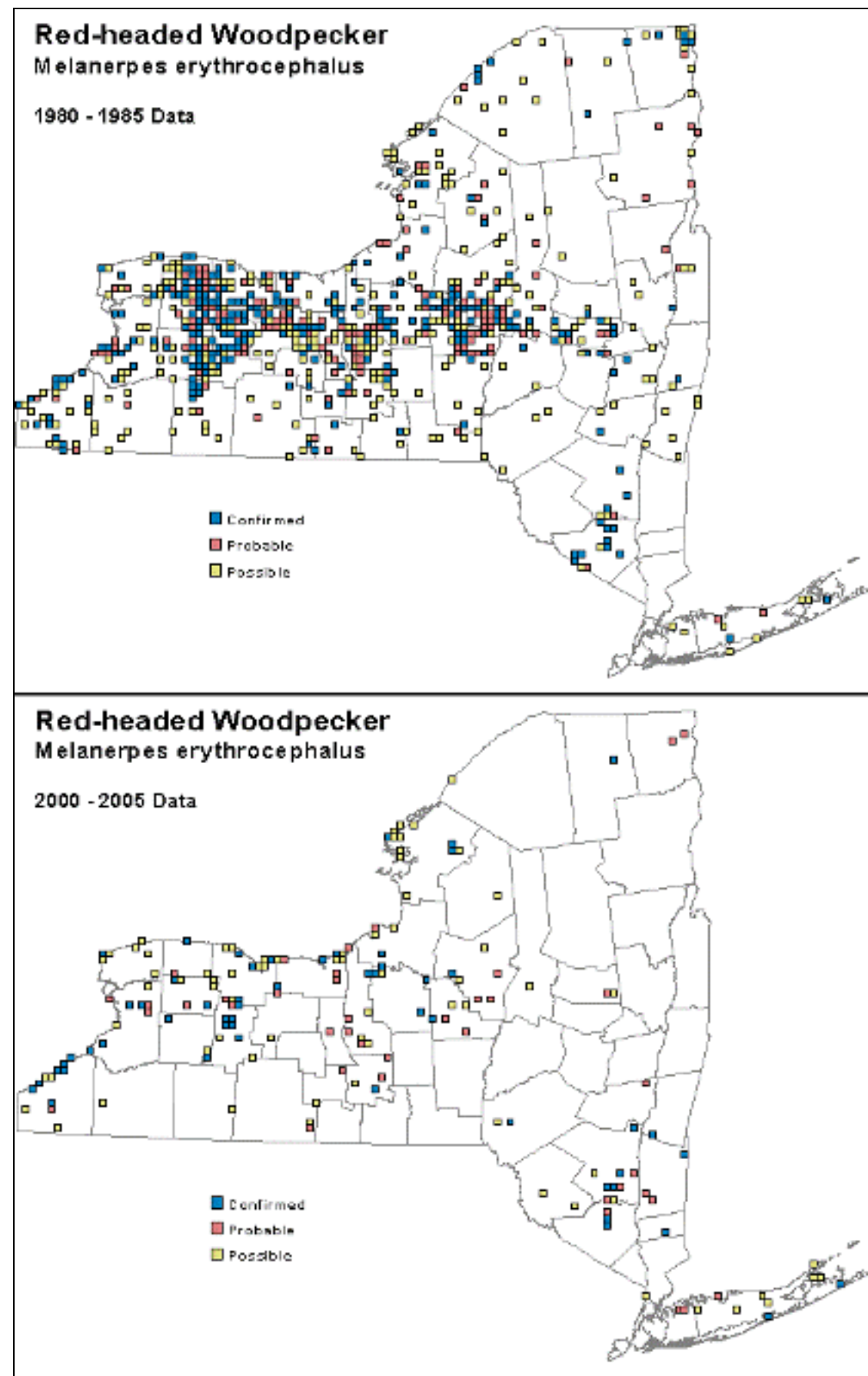
This species range extends from southern Canada to the Gulf coast through the eastern and central United States east of the Rocky Mountains and west of the New England states. Winters in the southern parts of its breeding range. Its breeding habitat is characterized by the presence of dead trees for nest sites, snags for roosting, and open ground for foraging. Prefers river bottoms, wooded swamps, and open grasslands with scattered trees.

Status

Historically the bright plumage of the red-headed woodpecker made it a popular target for hunters. Today it is a locally common breeder in the lowland areas of New York State. It was formerly more abundant but has suffered population declines throughout much of its breeding range. Breeding Bird Atlas results for New York illustrate this trend with red-headed woodpeckers being detected in significantly fewer blocks during the second atlas than in the first.

Management and Research Needs

Population declines of red-headed woodpeckers are thought to be due primarily to competition with European starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) for nesting cavities and collision with vehicles while foraging for insects along roadsides. Agricultural pesticide use can also inhibit red-headed populations. Habitat loss resulting from forest regeneration, fire suppression, and agricultural development is also a concern.



Distribution of red-headed woodpecker in New York from 1st and 2nd NYS Breeding Bird Atlas records.

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