

The red-bellied woodpecker is equipped with a bill that makes it the ultimate multi-tasker.

The Drill Team

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Attracting a mate in the avian world is sometimes like beating your head against the wall. Literally. Most birds exercise their vocal cords to produce a melodic song that both attracts a mate and advertises forbidden territory to other males. Lacking the ability to create much of a song, members of the woodpecker family woo a mate by drilling against anything that resonates—hollow tree trunks, aluminum-clad buildings and even (to the dismay of some) the hood of an automobile.

Woodpeckers are designed to drill. Equipped with strong neck muscles and a thick skull to prevent injury, they drill to attract a mate and, for a week or more each spring, they chip away at a dead or dying tree to excavate a foot-deep nesting cavity.

Illinois is home to seven species of woodpeckers, with the red-bellied wood-

pecker (*Melanerpes carolinus*) a common permanent resident that decreases in abundance northward. The only Illinois woodpecker with black-and-white, zebra-like barring on the wings and back, the red-bellied woodpecker is often mistaken for its less common cousin the red-headed woodpecker. An often difficult to see reddish wash on its abdomen is the source of the red-bellies' name. More easily discerned is the



Named for the faint reddish wash on its abdomen, the red-bellied woodpecker is most quickly identified by its zebra-like back and wings. Males (upper) and females (lower) can be distinguished by the amount of color on their head.

difference between the sexes—red-belly males are red from their bill to shoulder while females sport only a red patch on the nape of their neck.

A bird of swamps, urban settings and upland and bottomland deciduous forests and woodlands, red-bellied woodpeckers prefer to forage in deciduous trees for beetles, grasshoppers, ants, caterpillars, spiders and other insects, and a variety of nuts and fruits. Pulling insects out of a hole in a tree trunk requires another specialized tool—a long, sticky tongue with a barbed, spear-like tip. Imagine a tongue so long that when at rest it curls under their skin and up onto the back of their skull.

Woodpeckers are the ultimate example of an avian multi-tasker and are equipped for the hard-headed task at hand—carving themselves a place in the world—and getting a meal and mate at the same time.

