



NORTHERN HARDWOOD NOTES

Minimizing Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker Damage

The yellow-bellied sapsucker is a migratory woodpecker that feeds on a wide variety of orchard, shade, and forest trees. Instead of drilling holes to find insects like other woodpeckers, sapsuckers drill holes in living trees to feed on sap and phloem tissues. Yellow and paper birches are their favorite summer food sources on their nesting grounds in Upper Michigan and northern Wisconsin. Hemlock, sugar maple, and other species are favorites in the spring.

During the summer, each pair feeds on selected trees within their lo-acre territory. Nearly all feeding damage occurs within 500 feet of their nests which are excavated in dead trees, stubs, (or trees with decayed centers) over 10 inches in diameter. Sapsuckers cannot excavate more than 1 inch of sound wood, so most nests in second-growth stands are located in overmature aspens and dead stubs of cull trees left over from commercial clearcutting.

Adult sapsuckers drill characteristic $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch square holes through the bark to the cambium. Holes usually are drilled about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch apart in horizontal rows. On heavily damaged trees, rows of holes often extend several feet up the stem and patches of bark between holes flake off.

Heavy sapsucker feeding (50 or more holes in a band or patch) can lower wood quality, reduce growth, and even kill birch trees. Besides discoloration and decay, their feeding injuries cause a localized ring shake. Sapsuckers kill trees and cause top dying by girdling the main stem within and just beneath the live crown. Sapsuckers frequently return to feed on favorite trees in successive breeding seasons until the trees are killed.

These birds feed on trees of all sizes, but most heavily on large saw-log and pole-size trees. They prefer feeding on healthy dominant and codominant trees that have been excessively exposed by heavy thinning, or growing along roads, right-of-ways, and openings. Even in unmanaged stands, they select the largest paper and yellow birches as favorite feeding trees. Sapsuckers are also attracted to old sapsucker wounds and other types of injuries.

Sapsuckers are protected by State and Federal laws and probably could not be controlled by shooting or poisoning because other birds would soon fill vacant territories.

Here are several ways to lessen the impact of sapsucker damage on valuable yellow or white birch.

1. Don't leave valuable saw-log-size birch trees exposed along edges of openings or in shelterwood overstories as seed trees. Adequate seed can be obtained from four well distributed trees per acre or by applying 1/2 pound of stratified seed from a superior phenotype after site preparation.
2. Don't release birch trees more than 5 to 7 feet beyond their crown perimeters when thinning.
3. Immediately harvest valuable birch trees that are being or have been fed on.
4. Leave low-grade birch trees that sapsuckers are feeding on to slow their movement to more valuable birch trees (they may often kill a residual cull for you).
5. Fell all potential sapsucker nesting trees (large dead, cull, and overmature aspen with decayed centers) within 500 feet of prime birch trees or stands.

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