



All photos courtesy of Bob Shettler

FIRST CONFIRMED BREEDING OF RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER IN MANITOBA

Andy Courcelles

219-3069 Pembina Hwy
Winnipeg, MB R3T 4R6
ascour@shaw.ca

On one of our regular walks along a trail in the St-Norbert community, Winnipeg, Manitoba in April 2017, my wife Sandra (Sam) and I saw a female Red-bellied Woodpecker (*Melanerpes carolinus*) hitching up a tree trunk by the side of the trail and simultaneously heard a male calling from further back in the woods. In spite of hearing or seeing them for a period of some six weeks and making several searches in the woods, we never could find a nest. The breeding range of Red-bellied Woodpeckers is chiefly in the eastern half of the United States and extends to central Minnesota and the southeast corner

of North Dakota. Although they are seen annually in Manitoba, there had never been conclusive proof of them nesting in the province. Some young birds were seen in Kildonan Park, Winnipeg in 1942 and a female was seen with two fledged young at Whitemouth, Manitoba in 1952.¹ Neither of these records were accepted by the Manitoba Ornithological Records Committee as being fully substantiated. Therefore, when a similar scenario played itself out again on April 22, 2018, I decided to make a more concerted effort to find the nest this time.

The area in question is a patch of mature riparian forest along the Red River with an area of approximately 12 hectares. It consists mostly of green ash, American elm and some Manitoba maple trees and is bisected

by a flood-control dyke of some 20 metres in width.

On April 26, Sam and I set out for another hike and soon heard the male calling. We made our way toward the sound as quietly as possible, trying to avoid stepping on decades worth of fallen branches and tangles of shrubbery. Following the sound of the calling male, we homed in on the general area but could not see the bird. There was a suitable looking tree in front of us so we sat on a log and for some time could hear the calls but still could not see our quarry. I figured the bird was on the far side of the tree and would eventually come around to our side. When that didn't happen, I started to move in a circle toward the other side of the tree when all of a sudden, the male poked its head



out of a hole and ejected a beakful of wood chips. Eureka! It had been calling while it worked at excavating the hole some 20 metres up near the top of an ash tree.

I estimate that by May 3 the pair was at the egg-laying stage as they were entering and leaving the nest frequently but not spending much time inside. I called Bob Shettler and on May 8 we walked back in for him to take some photos, which he was able to do, albeit from about 25 to 30 metres distance and having to work through a maze of branches. At this time we also noted that the parents were taking turns on the nest, changing shifts about every 15 minutes. Over the next few weeks, I visited the nest roughly every four to seven days and saw the adults making feeding trips to the nest at various intervals. Finally, on June 12 I saw a nestling or nestlings coming to the edge of the nest hole and peering out; this happened three times over a period of half an hour while the adults were off foraging.



On June 16, Bob and I went back in an attempt to get some photos of the young, only to discover that they had already fledged. It may have been impossible to get a shot anyway as by this time the foliage was so thick as to make photography extremely difficult.

It has been very satisfying to be able to document the first breeding of this species in the province. As is their wont, these woodpeckers built this year's nest some 20 cm below last year's.² I hope to be able to observe the woodpeckers again next year should they be back to set up house in the same tree.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Bob Shettler for providing the photographs.

References

1. Manitoba Avian Research Committee (2003) The Birds of Manitoba. Manitoba Naturalists Society Winnipeg, Manitoba
2. Shackelford, Clifford E., Raymond E. Brown and Richard N. Conner. 2000. Red-bellied Woodpecker (*Melanerpes carolinus*), version 2.0. In The Birds of North America (P. G. Rodewald, editor). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, New York, USA 

POETRY

North West

A day tucked between
The head and tail
Of an Alberta Clipper
So, just above frost
Though swept and buffeted
By a frigid, biting wind.

Tolerable in the yard
Repairing an old gate
Barehanded to untie
The old, frayed rope
The cockeyed rails
And sagging, loose wire.

The horses nose at me
For treats or to get by
To the tangled tussocks
Of ungrazed grasses
I'm done and they race
To the barn's lee side.

The open pasture ridges
The wind dictates my stride
I balance against its strength
And Molly's long coat
Tosses, blows and twists
In a tricolour frenzy.

In the pointed protection
Of buffalo berry thickets
Still, hushed, soothed
The wind rushing by,
As though outdoors
We tucked in our barbed close.

The wind hurries our trek
As we climb the ridge
And ascend Hunters' Hill
Where it roars all sounds
To silence, nonexistence
It roars and rules here.

Turning into its cold force
Standing on the summit
Like standing on the bridge
Of a brave galleon
Tossing, fighting the gale
The grasses pitching like waves.

The gale blows so wild
On the thick cloud banks
It forces a gap to bloom
Under the noonday sun
Homeward into the wind
My face warms to Sol's might.

George Grassick
Box 205
Lumsden, SK
S0G 3C0
ggrassick@sasktel.net