

'FLYING CHECKERBOARD' A DELIGHT TO WATCH

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Have you seen a 'flying checkerboard' recently? That is one of the names for the Red-headed Woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*). With its crimson head, snow-white body, and black and white wings, I can see why it is called this, especially when it is flying.

Although the Red-headed Woodpecker is classed as 'threatened,' in our section of south-central Manitoba — in pastured areas a few kilometres from the town of MacGregor — this species seems to be doing well. Over the last few years, my husband and I have seen Red-headed Woodpeckers frequently (although prior to the last five years or so, I had only ever seen one).

My husband runs several bluebird lines (through Manitoba's 'Friends of the Bluebirds,' based in Brandon). Most of his boxes are in cattle pastures and in monitoring these boxes, we often see Red-headed Woodpeckers as well. We have located their nests twice, both times high up in a dead or dying tree. So far this summer we have seen red-heads in about six different locations.

This spring on one afternoon walk, we saw six woodpeckers in an hour. Three of them were in the same spot; the others were in three separate locations, so I am pretty sure there were six in total that day.

The three that were together appeared to be having a spat over one dead tree. They took turns landing on it, swooping away and



Adult Red-headed Woodpecker.
Photo credit: Donna Gamache

then coming again. Perhaps they all wanted it as a nesting site, or perhaps it was two males both trying to impress a female.

This particular tree stands very near a different dead tree where a pair nested two years ago. At that time, we watched them several times as the adults flew back and forth feeding young birds into a cavity near the top of the tree. Unlike many woodpeckers, red-heads often reuse a nest cavity for several years and I suspect that they were also re-using that tree last year, but unfortunately a bad windstorm blew the tree down, so any nest would have been destroyed.

In the late summer, each of the last two years, we have been fortunate to also see young red-heads flying around. Juveniles do not have a red head; instead it is a dark gray/brown. However, the bold white wing patches, contrasting with the black back, and the fact that



A Red-headed Woodpecker visits the tree in which it is nesting. Photo credit: Donna Gamache

adults were nearby, made them easily identifiable as red-heads.

If you're looking for Red-headed Woodpeckers, late July or August is a good time. Incubation often occurs during early July and takes about two weeks, after which the adults will be flying back and forth feeding the young in their nest for up to four weeks. Then for another while, the young may be flying in the same area. The flying checkerboard appearance always excites me and makes a hike worthwhile. 🐦