

1 **Red-headed Woodpecker**

2 **Ontario Government Response Statement**

3 **Protecting and Recovering Species at Risk in Ontario**

4 Species at risk recovery is a key part of protecting Ontario's biodiversity. The
5 *Endangered Species Act, 2007* (ESA) is the Ontario government's legislative
6 commitment to protecting and recovering species at risk and their habitats.

7 Under the ESA, the government must ensure that a recovery strategy is prepared for
8 each species that is listed as endangered or threatened. A recovery strategy provides
9 science-based advice to government on what is required to achieve recovery of a
10 species.

11 Generally, within nine months after a recovery strategy is prepared, the ESA requires
12 the government to publish a statement summarizing the government's intended actions
13 and priorities in response to the recovery strategy. The response statement is the
14 government's policy response to the scientific advice provided in the recovery strategy.
15 In addition to the strategy, the government response statement considers (where
16 available) input from Indigenous communities and organizations, stakeholders, other
17 jurisdictions, and members of the public. It reflects the best available local and scientific
18 knowledge, including Indigenous Knowledge where it has been shared by communities
19 and Knowledge Holders, as appropriate, and may be adapted if new information
20 becomes available. In implementing the actions in the response statement, the ESA
21 allows the government to determine what is feasible, taking into account social, cultural
22 and economic factors.

23 The Recovery Strategy for the Red-headed Woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*)
24 in Ontario was completed on September 6, 2022.

25 Red-headed Woodpecker is a medium-sized bird, about 20 cm long, and is easily
26 recognized by its vivid red head, neck and breast. The rest of the bird is white
27 underneath and mostly black on top.

28 **Protecting and Recovering Red-headed Woodpecker**

29 Red-headed Woodpecker is listed as an endangered species under the ESA, which
30 protects both the animal and its habitat. The ESA prohibits harm or harassment of the

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31 species and damage or destruction of its habitat without authorization or complying with
32 the requirements of a regulatory exemption.

33 Red-headed Woodpecker also receives protection under the *Migratory Birds*
34 *Convention Act, 1994*, which protects adults and young birds, as well as their nests and
35 eggs in Canada, and under the federal *Species at Risk Act, 2002*, as an endangered
36 species.

37 Red-headed Woodpecker occurs only in North America, from southern Saskatchewan
38 east to southeastern Quebec, and south throughout the eastern half of the United
39 States of America (U.S.) to the Gulf of Mexico coast. During the breeding season the
40 species is most abundant in the U.S. Midwest and Gulf Coast states. In Ontario, Red-
41 headed Woodpecker is most numerous south of the Canadian Shield, in the Carolinian
42 and Lake Simcoe-Rideau Ecoregions. It is also a regular breeder, although in small
43 numbers, in the Rainy River area in northwestern Ontario. The Ontario distribution is
44 estimated to represent approximately 4.3 per cent of the global breeding range and less
45 than 0.6 per cent of the global breeding population for the species. The majority of the
46 wintering range for Red-headed Woodpecker is in the U.S., but the species can over-
47 winter in southwestern Ontario.

48 Breeding habitat for Red-headed Woodpecker is mainly deciduous woodland habitat
49 with sparse canopy cover, mature trees – especially oak species (Genus: *Quercus*) and
50 American Beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) – and an open understory. In Ontario, the species
51 typically breeds in oak savannah, orchards, areas of dead or dying trees, municipal
52 parks, golf courses and agricultural landscapes. The presence of decadent trees (dead
53 trees and trees with dead limbs, including diseased trees) are an especially important
54 component of suitable breeding habitat. Less canopy cover, more coarse woody debris
55 and longer dead limbs appear to be important drivers for the selection of breeding
56 habitat. Breeding territory size has been found to range from 3.1 to 11.4 ha in the
57 southern U.S. Breeding territory size has not been determined for Ontario, but the
58 species has been noted to typically feed within 1 km of its nest. Large decadent
59 deciduous trees are generally used to excavate nesting cavities, and cavity
60 concealment by surrounding vegetation appears to be important for nest success.

61 Red-headed Woodpecker is omnivorous, with its diet varying based on the availability of
62 food sources between seasons. In Ontario, insects (mainly aerial and those living on
63 bark) make up most of the diet during spring migration. This proportion shifts over the
64 summer as tree nuts (oak acorns and American Beech nuts), fruit, corn, and seed
65 become more abundant. Insects consumed during the summer (either on trees, in the
66 air, or on the ground) consist mostly of beetles but also include grasshoppers,

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67 caterpillars, wasps, domesticated bees and some ants. Corn, apples and tree nuts are
68 important during autumn migration, and the species relies almost exclusively on tree
69 nuts in the winter (and corn in years with low amounts of tree nuts), while invertebrates
70 (mainly adult beetles) can make up a small portion during that season.

71 Red-headed Woodpecker populations seem to have undergone a long-term decline for
72 at least the last 50 years. From 1970 to the mid 2010s, it is estimated that the
73 abundance of Red-headed Woodpecker declined in North America by 86 per cent and
74 in Ontario by 83 per cent. In the twenty-year period between the first (1981–1985) and
75 second (2001–2005) Ontario Breeding Bird Atlases (OBBA), the overall probability of
76 observing Red-headed Woodpecker declined by 64 per cent. During this time, the
77 species' range appeared to shift southward from previously occupied areas as it was
78 much less commonly recorded in the southern Canadian Shield and eastern Ontario.
79 However, OBBA data show that the range has remained almost unchanged in the Rainy
80 River area of northwestern Ontario.

81 There are several threats that may be having a cumulative effect on Red-headed
82 Woodpecker in Ontario. The primary threats are the loss of nesting sites and
83 degradation of suitable habitat, as well as a reduction in food supply (including reduced
84 abundance and diversity of insects due to insecticide use, and reduced abundance of
85 tree nuts due to tree diseases). Direct mortality from collisions with buildings, vehicles,
86 utility towers, and power lines as well as competition with the introduced European
87 Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), and predation by the domesticated cat (*Felis catus*) and the
88 native Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) and Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*)
89 are other contributing threats. Birdwatching and/or photography are potential threats to
90 Red-headed Woodpecker but the severity of disturbance from these activities is
91 unknown.

92 Slowing the decline and achieving a self-sustaining population of Red-headed
93 Woodpecker in Ontario will require appropriate and ongoing maintenance, restoration
94 and/or creation of the habitat the species uses for breeding and foraging. It is important
95 to acknowledge that ongoing declines in the U.S., including in states adjacent to
96 Ontario, may impact Ontario's ability to recover the species. Research and monitoring
97 are also needed to determine and track habitat use by Red-headed Woodpecker and
98 improve understanding of ongoing threats. Increasing awareness of the species, its
99 threats and best management practices is needed to support its protection and
100 recovery.

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101 **Government's Recovery Goal**

102 The government's short-term goal for the recovery of Red-headed Woodpecker in
103 Ontario is to halt the population decline by mitigating threats and promoting suitable
104 habitat conditions over the next 10 years. The long-term goal is to achieve a self-
105 sustaining population and to support natural increases in the species' abundance and
106 distribution in Ontario.

107 **Actions**

108 Protecting and recovering species at risk is a shared responsibility. No single agency or
109 organization has the knowledge, authority or financial resources to protect and recover
110 all of Ontario's species at risk. Successful recovery requires inter-governmental co-
111 operation and the involvement of many individuals, organizations and communities. In
112 developing the government response statement, the government considered what
113 actions are feasible for the government to lead directly and what actions are feasible for
114 the government to support its conservation partners to undertake.

115 **Government-led Actions**

116 To help protect and recover Red-headed Woodpecker, the government will directly
117 undertake the following actions:

- 118
- Continue to protect Red-headed Woodpecker and its habitat through the ESA.
 - 119 • Undertake communications and outreach to increase public awareness of
120 species at risk in Ontario (e.g. through Ontario Parks Discovery Program, where
121 appropriate).
 - 122 • Continue to monitor populations and mitigate threats to the species and its
123 habitat in provincially protected areas, where feasible and appropriate.
 - 124 • Educate other agencies and authorities involved in planning and environmental
125 assessment processes on the protection requirements under the ESA.
 - 126 • Encourage the submission of Red-headed Woodpecker data to Ontario's central
127 repository through the [NHIC \(Rare species of Ontario\) project in iNaturalist](#) or
128 directly through the [Natural Heritage Information Centre](#).
 - 129 • Continue to support conservation, agency, municipal and industry partners, and
130 Indigenous communities and organizations to undertake activities to protect and

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- 131 recover Red-headed Woodpecker. Support will be provided where appropriate
132 through funding, agreements, permits and/or advisory services.
- 133 • Work with partners and stakeholders to support beneficial insects in Ontario
134 through actions such as education and promoting integrated pest management
135 and best management practices.
 - 136 • Continue to implement the *Ontario Invasive Species Strategic Plan (2012)* to
137 address the invasive species (e.g. Beech Bark Disease [*Neonectria faginata*],
138 Emerald Ash Borer [*Agilus planipennis*]) that threaten Red-headed Woodpecker
139 and its habitat.
 - 140 • Continue to manage Crown forests in a manner that minimizes adverse impacts
141 to species at risk and their habitats.
 - 142 • Conduct a review of progress toward the protection and recovery of Red-headed
143 Woodpecker within five years of the publication of this document.

144 **Government-supported Actions**

145 The government endorses the following actions as being necessary for the protection
146 and recovery of Red-headed Woodpecker. Actions identified as “high” may be given
147 priority consideration for funding under the Species at Risk Stewardship Program.
148 Where reasonable, the government will also consider the priority assigned to these
149 actions when reviewing and issuing authorizations under the ESA. Other organizations
150 are encouraged to consider these priorities when developing projects or mitigation plans
151 related to species at risk.

152 Focus Area:	Habitat Management and Protection
153 Objective:	Maintain and, where feasible, increase the availability of suitable 154 habitat in Ontario.

155 Loss of habitat, including suitable nesting and foraging areas, is thought to be a leading
156 cause of the decline of Red-headed Woodpecker in Ontario. Key features of suitable
157 habitat include decadent deciduous trees for nest building and the presence of nut-
158 producing deciduous trees as a food source. Ensuring suitable habitat is available in the
159 short-term will be important to slow the population decline, and strategic habitat
160 management and securement will support long-term natural increases in the species’
161 abundance and distribution in Ontario. As land ownership varies across the species’
162 distribution, a collaborative approach to habitat management and protection is critical to
163 the protection and recovery of this species.

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Actions:

1. **(High)** Undertake and evaluate management activities to maintain, improve and restore habitat for Red-headed Woodpecker in collaboration with local landowners, land managers, Indigenous communities and organizations, municipalities, forestry professionals and stewardship organizations. Consideration should be given to ensure that habitat conservation efforts are targeted to the most appropriate locations (e.g. areas with few or no European Starling populations). Management activities may include:
 - i. developing, promoting and implementing best management practices (BMPs) for the retention and continued supply of decadent deciduous trees (dead trees and trees with dead limbs)
 - ii. implementing techniques to reduce canopy coverage and understory density while maintaining or increasing the abundance of mature and decadent deciduous trees (e.g. conducting prescribed burns, mechanical removal of woody vegetation, tree or limb girdling)
 - iii. planting nut-producing trees (e.g. oak species) as appropriate, in habitat areas where declines of these trees have been documented
 - iv. monitoring and managing (as appropriate and feasible) invasive insects and pathogens posing a direct threat to habitat
2. Collaborate with local landowners, community partners and stewardship organizations to strategically identify and secure Red-headed Woodpecker habitat and encourage long term protection through existing land securement and stewardship programs and/or land securement agencies as opportunities arise.

Focus Area:	Research and Monitoring
Objective:	Increase knowledge of Red-headed Woodpecker's threats, habitat, ecology, distribution and abundance within Ontario.

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A comprehensive understanding of the threats impacting Red-headed Woodpecker is needed to better focus protection and recovery efforts. Similarly, it is important to better understand the species' habitat characteristics and ecology to ensure efforts are directed in a manner that provides the greatest benefit to the species. Monitoring Red-headed Woodpecker and its habitat will help track progress and determine whether efforts to maintain or enhance habitat are successful.

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Actions:

3. Investigate potential threats to the species including:

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- 200 i. **(High)** assessing the range-wide severity of direct (e.g. ingestion of
201 neonicotinoid-treated seed and crops) and indirect impacts (e.g.
202 insect prey abundance, contamination of plant material consumed) of
203 neonicotinoid and other insecticide use, according to time of year and
204 habitat
205 ii. assessing the severity of direct mortality from collisions with building
206 windows, wind turbines, moving vehicles, transmission lines and
207 communication towers
208 iii. assessing the impact of predation pressure from Cooper’s Hawk and
209 Sharp-shinned Hawk, and competition from European Starling
210 iv. assessing the severity of disturbance from birdwatching and/or
211 photography
212 4. Improve knowledge of habitat use, condition, and availability in Ontario to
213 inform habitat protection, management, and enhancement. This may
214 include:
215 i. assessing the impact of Beech Bark Disease and Emerald Ash Borer
216 on the availability of food and nesting sites
217 ii. research into Red-headed Woodpecker home range and territory
218 sizes
219 iii. research to increase the precision with which suitable habitat can be
220 described, including research into how seasonal habitat use relates
221 to diet
222 5. Measure nesting productivity, nesting success, fledgling survival, and
223 survivorship throughout the year in Ontario to help determine whether
224 population decline is due to factors on Ontario breeding grounds.
225 6. Monitor the species’ distribution and population trends in Ontario, using
226 established surveys and monitoring programs where appropriate, and
227 refine understanding of the current and historical population abundance
228 and distribution.
229 7. Collaboratively investigate the impact of threats occurring outside of
230 Ontario (e.g. in wintering areas and along migration routes) on Red-
231 headed Woodpecker.

232	Focus Area:	Stewardship and Awareness
233	Objective:	Increase public awareness of Red-headed Woodpecker, its habitat
234		and threats, and promote stewardship of the species in Ontario.

235 Red-headed Woodpecker and its habitat is found on lands utilized for a variety of
236 purposes. Therefore, the education and involvement of the public is a key factor in
237 supporting recovery of the species, particularly to encourage use of best management

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238 practices for insecticide use, forest management and tree removal. Ensuring
239 landowners are aware of the presence of the species and its threats will require
240 collaboration between organizations with an emphasis on sharing the best available
241 information. Increased promotion and volunteer participation in established survey and
242 monitoring programs will further awareness of the species, as well as contribute to filling
243 knowledge gaps.

244 **Actions:**

- 245 8. **(High)** Engage landowners, foresters, land managers, the agricultural
246 sector and Indigenous communities and organizations to promote the
247 retention of deciduous cavity trees, snags, dead limbs of trees and mast
248 trees, where feasible and safe, in order to provide nest sites and food
249 sources for Red-headed Woodpecker.
- 250 9. Develop and distribute materials or programs that increase awareness of
251 landowners, land managers, and land users on topics relating to:
- 252 i. best forest management practices that will help recover Red-headed
253 Woodpecker, such as harvesting wood outside of the species'
254 breeding season
 - 255 ii. volunteer participation in established surveys and monitoring
256 programs, such as eBird or the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario
 - 257 iii. raising awareness with rural landowners on the impact of predation
258 by domestic cats and ways this can be minimized

259 Focus Area:	Threat Management and Mitigation
260 Objective:	Reduce threats to the species and its food sources in Ontario.

261 Reduced food supply for Red-headed Woodpecker and direct mortality of the species
262 from collisions with buildings, vehicles, utility towers, and power lines are potential
263 threats to the species. Competition from European Starling, predation by Cooper's
264 Hawk and Sharp-shinned Hawk and birdwatching and/or photography are potential
265 contributing threats to Red-headed Woodpecker recovery. Determining the
266 effectiveness of mitigation measures to address these threats will allow for appropriate
267 threat management activities.

268 **Actions:**

- 269 10. Develop and promote best management practices to minimize threats to
270 invertebrate food sources, such as promoting integrated pest
271 management principles (in particular the use of insecticides with the
272 lowest toxicity to birds and non-target insects), avoidance of insecticide
273 application to field edges, and further reducing overall pesticide use.

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- 274 11. Based on the outcomes of Action 3, develop, implement and assess the
275 effectiveness of mitigation measures to address relevant threats to Red-
276 headed Woodpecker as appropriate. This may include the following, as
277 necessary:
- 278 i. guidelines or standards, as necessary to reduce the frequency of bird
279 collisions with building windows, wind turbines, moving vehicles,
280 transmission lines and communication towers
 - 281 ii. methods to reduce the disturbance from birdwatching and/or
282 photography
 - 283 iii. approaches to reduce competition from European Starling and
284 predation from Cooper’s Hawk and Sharp-shinned Hawk

285 **Implementing Actions**

286 Financial support for the implementation of actions may be available through the
287 Species at Risk Stewardship Program. Conservation partners are encouraged to
288 discuss project proposals related to the actions in this response statement with Ministry
289 of the Environment, Conservation and Parks staff. The Ontario government can also
290 provide guidance about the requirements of the ESA, including whether an authorization
291 or regulatory exemption may be required for the project and, if so, the authorization
292 types and/or conditional exemptions for which the activity may be eligible.

293 Implementation of the actions may be subject to changing priorities across the multitude
294 of species at risk, available resources and the capacity of partners to undertake
295 recovery activities. Where appropriate, the implementation of actions for multiple
296 species will be coordinated across government response statements.

297 **Reviewing Progress**

298 The ESA requires the Ontario government to conduct a review of progress towards
299 protecting and recovering a species no later than the time specified in the species’
300 government response statement, which has been identified as five years. The review
301 will help identify if adjustments are needed to achieve the protection and recovery of
302 Red-headed Woodpecker.

303 **Acknowledgement**

304 We would like to thank all those who participated in the development of the Recovery
305 Strategy and Government Response Statement for the Red-headed Woodpecker

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306 (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) in Ontario for their dedication to protecting and
307 recovering species at risk.

308 **For Additional Information:**

309 Visit the species at risk website at ontario.ca/speciesatrisk
310 Contact the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks
311 1-800-565-4923
312 TTY 1-855-515-2759
313 www.ontario.ca/environment