Recognizing Sapsucker Damage in Yard Trees

MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

You may have noticed a line of shallow holes neatly drilled into a tree in front of your home. In the South, this is the work of the yellow-bellied sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*), a type of woodpecker. There are four sapsucker species in North America, but the yellow-bellied sapsucker is black and white with a red cap and throat patch in males (**Figure 1**), but not females.

Figure 1. Male yellow-bellied sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*).
Photo credit: Johnny N. Dell, Bugwood.org

Sapsucker Holes

The holes are known as sapwells, and the sapsucker makes them so it can eat sap that drains from inside the tree. It also eats insects that may have been trapped in the sap, although sapsuckers are mainly interested in the sap itself. Unlike other woodpeckers, sapsuckers do not peck into a tree looking for insects. The sapsucker usually makes new holes in line with old holes (**Figure 2**). Holes are approximately one-quarter of an inch in diameter. The sapsucker makes two types of holes. First is the round hole that extends deep into the tree where the bird probes for sap. After making these holes, the bird maintains shallow, rectangular holes so that sap continues to flow. The sapsucker licks sap from these holes and may even eat the cambium of the tree.

Trees may exhibit holes for a number of reasons, including other woodpeckers, bark beetles, other insects, and decay. Sapsucker damage is notable because the holes are pecked close together and in rows. Other types of holes are not uniformly aligned. Insect holes are typically fewer and smaller in diameter. Further, insect holes are often identified by frass, or the boring dust left by the insect as it drills through the tree.

Figure 2. Sapsucker damage on a yard tree.

Sapsucker Habitat

Sapsuckers prefer trees with thin bark, such as maple and birch. Bradford pears also are common hosts for sapsuckers because they have soft bark. The birds also prefer young, vigorous trees, although older trees are not immune. Trees with thick, furrowed bark are better defended against sapsuckers than smooth-barked trees.

Impact on the Tree

The tree should recover from minor damage, but excessive numbers of holes can allow entry of insects and decay fungi that can cause secondary damage to the tree. Stress from intensive feeding can lead to cambium girdling, decline in tree health, and eventual death of the tree.

Control

Sapsuckers, like all woodpeckers, are protected by the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act, so lethal control requires a permit. The most common control method is to discourage the sapsucker from returning by wrapping burlap around the affected area; however, this may shift the bird's attention to neighboring trees. Do not keep burlap on the tree indefinitely, as other damage may occur given sufficient time. Additional techniques include encircling the tree with chicken wire, applying reflective tape to branches (tape with a crinkling sound deters the birds as well), and draping the tree with plastic netting.

Besides tape, any reflective surface, such as old CDs or pie plates, will deter birds because they scare when they see bright sunlight reflected. Bird sound deterrents use soundwaves undetectable by humans, but batteries in these devices must be replaced frequently. A decoy hawk or owl can be used, as well, but should be moved around the tree every few days so the woodpecker will think the decoy is alive.

Publication 3302 (POD-12-18)

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Produced by Agricultural Communications.