

Sapsucker Damage on Woody Plants

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Introduction

The yellow-bellied sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*) (Figure 1) is a member of the American woodpecker family of migratory birds. This bird overwinters in Central America and southern North America. It spends the summer in Canada and northern United States. This group of woodpeckers pecks holes in trees and larger woody shrubs, feeding on the bark, sap and insects drawn to the sap (Figure 2). This sapsucker tends to rely more on plant sap than insects for its diet. Typically, these holes are not harmful, but some trees or shrubs may die if holes are extensive enough to girdle the trunk or stem. Their feeding habits can also degrade wood quality of trees used for commercial purposes.

While this woodpecker can attack a wide variety of woody trees and shrubs, studies have indicated that the bird has feeding preferences among plants. For example, feeding is more likely on red maple than Southern red oak trees. Favorite southern trees of the yellow-bellied sapsucker include maple (*Acer* spp.), pecan (*Carya*), birch (*Betula* spp.), pine (*Pinus* spp.), elm (*Ulmus* spp.) and some oaks (*Quercus* spp.). These birds are attracted to old sapsucker wounds and other types of injury that occur to woody shrubs and trees. They may return to the same trees each season.

Damage Symptoms

Sapsucker damage is most often seen on the main plant stem of larger woody shrubs and many trees as



Figure 1. Yellow-bellied sapsuckers. The female bird is on the left, and the male bird is on the right (photo courtesy of <http://monarchbfly.com/>).



Figure 2. Sapsucker holes and resin flow on pine.

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Figure 3. Sapsucker holes on sweetgum.



Figure 4. Sapsucker holes on pecan.



Figure 5. Sapsucker holes on Viburnum.

bands of round drill holes (Figure 3 and Figure 4) or as rows of small rectangular areas (Figure 5). Sapsucker damage is recognized by neatly spaced horizontal or vertical rows of holes in the tree trunks or on the branches. These holes are usually relatively shallow in the cambium or inner bark areas. Sapsuckers use their tongues to lap up sap from the holes produced.

Round holes made by the sapsucker usually extend deep into the tree, whereas rectangular holes are shallower. This woodpecker licks the sap from the holes and may eat portions of the cambium. The “drill holes” may encircle the entire stem. Holes made by the sapsucker can provide points of entry for wood-decaying fungi and bacteria. The physical damage may weaken trees or shrubs, making them more susceptible to secondary diseases and insects. Homeowners may mistake sapsucker damage for trunk-boring insects. The holes made by borers appear more randomly and are not neatly arranged in a row pattern as with the sapsucker.

Management

Homeowners should watch trees and shrubs for the appearance of new damage. While most people will choose not to control the bird feeding, others may wish for some kind of control option. Woodpeckers are persistent and can be difficult to deter from their pecking sites. Options typically involve exclusion or repellents. Using multiple methods could improve your success in driving them away. Recurrent sapsucker damage may be prevented in susceptible

trees by wrapping damaged areas with a loose, coarse material such as burlap. Once the feeding period has passed, the burlap should be removed from the plant. A lightweight netting may work well as a covering on shrubs. Visual frightening devices such as hanging pie pans, reflective mylar strips and fake owls that display movement have had some success at scaring sapsuckers away from a particular tree or area. Some sound-making devices, such as hand clapping or banging on metal trash can lids, have been effective in some cases. Tactile (sticky) repellents applied to the stems may be useful to deter bird visitation. Sapsuckers are protected by state and federal law; therefore, lethal control is not an option. This includes using any type of toxicant or shooting.

Contact your local county Extension office or garden center for other options that may discourage bird visits.

References

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