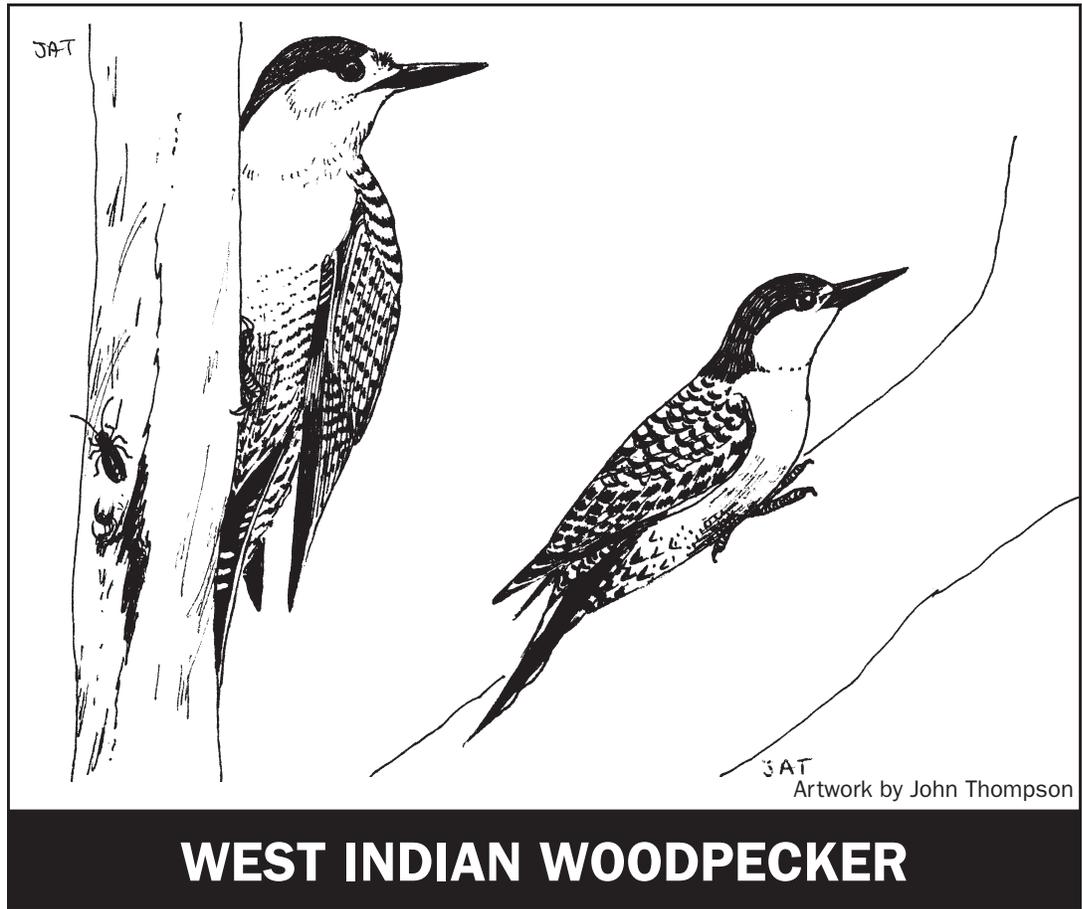




## Birds of the Bahamian Pine Forest



### WEST INDIAN WOODPECKER

#### SCIENTIFIC NAME

*Melanerpes superciliaris*

#### COMMON NAMES

Red-headed Woodpecker, Pecker-wood, Red-Head

#### DESCRIPTION

The West Indian Woodpecker at approximately 10 inches in length, is the largest of the three woodpeckers that occur in The Bahamas. Its back and wings are striped black and white. Its underparts are a buff-cinnamon to brownish gray and its abdomen is red. Males have a scarlet crown, which extends down the back of the neck. In females the red is restricted to the rear of the head and back of the neck.

#### DIET

Woodpeckers play a special role in the food chain. They drill into trees to uncover insect food, to create nesting shelters and to communicate with other woodpeckers. While they do punch holes in trees, these trees are rarely healthy ones. By stripping the bark from dead or dying trees and cleaning up the resident wood borers or carpenter ants, they prevent these pests from spreading to nearby healthy trees. Woodpeckers feed mainly on wood-boring grubs, insects, insect eggs and pupae. They also consume sap, nuts, and the fruit of some trees and shrubs.

The West Indian Woodpecker has a number of body adaptations, which make it ideally suited for its unique place in the food chain. It has a sharp, stout bill with a chisel-like tip for chipping and digging into tree trunks and branches. Bones between the beak

and the unusually thick skull are not as rigidly joined as they are in other birds. Spongy, shock-absorbing tissues connect these flexible joints; strong neck muscles provide force for drilling and bristly feathers shield the nostrils from dust and wood chips. The tip of the woodpecker's tongue is pointed and barbed. Its tongue is nearly twice as long as the woodpecker's head and winds around the inside back of the skull when retracted. After a hole is bored the long flexible tongue feels out, impales and withdraws the larvae. To grip trees, a woodpecker has short muscular legs and sharply clawed feet. Stiff, pointed tailfeathers catch on the rough bark to brace the hammering body.

## **REPRODUCTION**

West Indian Woodpeckers breed from January to August. After pair formation, West Indian Woodpeckers excavate a nest cavity in a tree, palm or cactus. They lay from 2 to 6 white (unmarked) eggs in the bottom of the cavity. Both sexes incubate the eggs; the more aggressive male stays on the eggs overnight for protection against predators. Young are altricial (featherless and blind). For two or three weeks they remain in the nest and are fed pre-digested food by their parents.

## **HABITAT, RANGE AND STATUS**

The West Indian Woodpecker lives in primarily dry forests, scrub forests and swamp edges, coastal forests and palm groves. This bird is only found in The Bahamas, Cuba and the Cayman Islands. In The Bahamas it is common on Abaco, where it inhabits settled areas, uncommon on San Salvador and is apparently extirpated (no longer in residence) on Grand Bahama.

## **THREATS**

Habitat loss due to loss of mature forests is the major threat to the survival of West Indian Woodpeckers.

## **INTERESTING FACTS**

- In Cuba, where the West Indian Woodpecker co-exists with the Rose-throated Parrot (Cuban Parrot), the parrot often uses abandoned woodpecker cavities for its own nest.
- Woodpeckers “drum” on resonant limbs, hollow tree trunks, drainpipes, garbage can lids, tin roofs etc. Drumming designates territory and can attract a mate. Soft tapping may be a type of communication between mates, or between parents and offspring.