

Recognizing Sapsucker Damage in Yard Trees

You may have noticed a line of shallow holes neatly drilled into the tree in the 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.

Sapsucker Holes

The holes are known as sapwells, and the sapsucker makes the holes so it can eat the sap that drains from inside the tree. It also eats any 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 the old holes (Figure 2). Holes are approximately one-quarter of an inch in diameter. The sapsucker makes two types of holes. Round holes extend deep into the tree, and the bird uses its bill to probe for sap inside these holes. Shallow, rectangular holes must be maintained so they will continue releasing sap. The sapsucker licks sap from these holes and may also eat the cambium of the tree.

Trees may exhibit holes for a number of reasons, including other woodpeckers, bark beetles, and other insects. Sapsucker damage is notable because the holes are pecked close together and in rows. Other types of holes are not uniformly aligned. Insect holes will be 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 1. Male yellow-bellied sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*).
Photo credit: Johnny N. Dell, Bugwood.org



Figure 2. Sapsucker damage on a maple 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 damage 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.

A more common control method is to discourage the sapsucker from returning by wrapping burlap around the affected area; however, this could shift the bird's attention to neighboring trees. Do not keep burlap on the tree indefinitely. Additional methods 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 found at the local hardware store.

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 the batteries in these devices must be replaced frequently. A decoy hawk or owl can be used to scare the woodpecker, but you should move it around the tree every few days so the woodpecker will think the decoy is alive.

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