

Woodpecker's call is sure sign of spring

By Lam Messee
outdoors writer

An icy crust of snow still blanketed the ground last weekend. To the eye, there wasn't a sign of spring on the hill overlooking the Rouge River and the frozen pond. The little black dog and I had many acres of fields and woods to ourselves.

Then, from a stand of dead trees in what would be a swamp in a few weeks, came a rat-a-tat-tat sound of spring: a woodpecker.

Which species I couldn't tell. Despite the lack of foliage, I never spotted the red-headed drummer. The hairy and downy woodpeckers are most common in these parts.

Why is a woodpecker's sound a sign of spring? The woodpecker is an all-year resident of Michigan, according to Mark Szabo, a Kensington Metopark naturalist.

But if three-fourths of a woodpecker's diet is bugs, then how can he survive? Other bug-eaters fly south. "If you hear back the bark on your firewood," Szabo said, "you'll find beetles who are dormant. They'll begin moving fast enough when it warms up. Woodpeckers can feed on them all winter long."

Well, then: If woodpeckers are around all winter, why don't we hear them until early March? You'd think they would be easy to hear in the clear winter air.

"I didn't hear any myself until just a

outdoors

couple of days ago," Szabo replied. "They make no sound when they're feeding in soft, rotted stumps where the beetles are."

"But in spring the males begin make a loud tapping in order to attract mates. Sometimes in cities they tap on a house to call a mate. That's when people find them a nuisance."

Most species of woodpeckers have white backs and some red on their heads. The hairy woodpecker is 10 inches long with a 17-inch wing spread; the downy, only six inches long with a 12-inch wing spread.

They will nest in the spot where I heard the male — dead trees, five to 50 feet high. The hairy will hatch three to five eggs, the downy four to six.

If the male woodpecker says it's spring, well, his word is good enough for me.

ICE FISHING is a hit-and-miss proposition — that word from district state conservation officers.

Fair size bluegills are coming from Belleville Lake. Perch fishing is poor on Brent Bay of Lake Erie and spotty on Anchor Bay of Lake St. Clair.

Northern pike fishing is poor everywhere.

The only good news comes from the mouth of the Huron River and off the "big banana" at Pointe Mouillee, Lake Erie, where anglers have been successful with perch.

BACKPACKING or bicycling through Europe this summer? American Youth Hostels has two travel workshops.

The first will be Sunday, March 28 and the second April 25. Both will be at 2 p.m. in the Berkley Community Center, 2300 Robina (just off Catalpa and a block west of Coolidge).

A panel of travel agents and recent travelers will give pointers on what to take and how to get around. Fee is \$3.

AYH is a non-profit organization which promotes hostelling — "traveling under your own steam." It has 5,000 hostels at \$3-6 per night around the world.

HURON-CLINTON Metroparks have

these weekend nature programs lined up:

• "Making Maple Syrup" goes on each Saturday and Sunday at 12:30 and 4 p.m. at the Farm Center at the north end of Kensington Metopark, near Millford. Farm interpreters boll down sap gathered from maple trees. Visitors can walk into the woods where trees are being tapped.

• Kensington's nature center will observe "National Wildlife Week" with a family program at 10:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. Sunday, March 14. Naturalist Mark Szabo will discuss park inhabitants with slides and mounted specimens and finish with a one-hour walk. Register in advance by calling the nature center at 685-1561.

HOMA nature programs are all free unless otherwise noted. There is a vehicle admission of \$2, but it's a good idea to get the season pass at \$7.



Old Mother Hubbard
Went to the cupboard
To fetch her poor dog a bone.
But when she got there
The dog, without care...
Had gone to Northland's

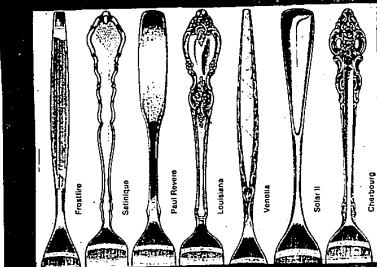
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