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Many
nesting birds
like a roof
over
their heads

Aspen nurseries

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Birds that chisel their own nests prefer aspen because of the scars that form around shed branches and the soft wood underneath. (Aspen grove by Jeff Vanuga, purple martins by F.C. & Janice Bergquist)

The aspen tree is a keystone of forest habitat in the West. Deer and elk use aspen groves for both food and shelter. They browse on the young saplings that spring up from the parent trees' huge network of roots and on the thick green grasses and forbs that grow in the broken shade beneath the trees. Insects feed on the leaves and bark, which, in turn, provide food for many species of birds. The thick, leafy canopy shelters the nests of a host of bird species, ranging from the largest eagles and hawks to

tiny hummingbirds and vireos.

But, like everything in nature, there comes a time for these beautiful, stately trees to die. When this happens, the trees slowly decay, providing nutrients for the next generation of aspens. This process takes time— most of these dead trees will remain standing for many years, and they have their own value.

Dead aspens provide nest sites for a large, specialized group of birds that are appropriately called cavity nesters. These birds use holes in the soft centers of the dead trees for their nurseries. They will use nest holes in any species of tree; aspens simply provide more holes than other trees.

Bird biologists divide cavity-nesting birds into two groups: primary and secondary cavity nesters. Woodpeckers, nuthatches, and chickadees are primary cavity nesters. These birds dig their own nest holes— most species of woodpecker dig a new nest hole each year because it is an essential part of their pair bonding. Since they do not return to the hole they dig in subsequent years, it becomes available to new tenants. These safe, warm cavities

are prized as nesting locations by a wide variety of birds.

Birds that nest in holes dug by other species, and never dig their own, are called secondary cavity nesters. Birds in this group include bluebirds, wrens, swallows, some small raptors, and several species of small owls.

In North America, there are twenty-two species of woodpeckers, four species of nuthatches, and seven species of chickadees. In Wyoming, nine species of woodpeckers, three species of nuthatches, and two species of chickadees raise their broods in holes in aspen.

The three species of nuthatches— white-breasted, red-breasted, and pygmy— and the two species of chickadee— black-capped and mountain— are usually considered primary nesters. They will reuse old holes when they find one that fits their needs but are perfectly capable of digging their own.

The largest and one of the most common of the woodpecker clan is the red-shafted flicker. This foot-long bird is easily recognized by its large size, brown and gray barred plumage,

Two kinds of birds nest in aspen holes— the ones that dig their own and the ones that don't. The northern flicker (bottom left) and red-naped sapsucker (bottom center) belong to the first group; the violet-green swallow (bottom right) and kestrel (opposite page) belong to the second. (Flicker by F.C. & Janice Bergquist; others by Greg Bergquist)

spotted breast with a large black bib, and, on the male, two bright red mustache stripes. Flickers are probably the most important of all of the primary cavity nesters, because they make a hole that is roughly two to three inches in diameter, large enough to accommodate several of the larger species of secondary nesters.

Birds as large as American kestrels and most small owl species, such as screech, pygmy, boreal, saw-whet, and flammulated, all regularly use old flicker holes. The only nesting flammulated owl ever found in Wyoming was using a flicker hole in a large aspen tree in the Sierra Madre Range of extreme southern Carbon County.

Many other smaller species of birds such as mountain bluebirds, house wrens, tree and violet-green swallows







Several of the West's small owls, including this flammulated owl (left) and western screech owl (right), nest in aspen holes when they have the chance. (Flammulated owl by F.C. & Janice Bergquist; screech owl by Tim Christie)

will all use old flicker holes for nest sites. However, these species can also use the holes of smaller woodpecker species and are not limited to the flicker holes as are the larger birds like the kestrels and owls.

Downy and hairy woodpeckers are look-alikes that vary mainly in size. The downy is six-and-three-quarters inches long and the hairy is nine-and-one-quarter inches long. Because of this difference in size, the entrance of the nest of the hairy woodpecker is about two-and-one-quarter inches in diameter, while the downy digs one about one-and-one-half inches across. Both nest holes are very usable for many of the smaller secondary cavity-nesting birds.

The three-toed and black-backed woodpeckers also nest in aspens but not as commonly as the above species. A good percentage of them will nest in live or dead conifer trees or in aspens that are mixed with stands of conifers. The three-toed is found over much Wyoming's high country while the black-backed is loosely restricted to the Black Hills. The entrance hole created by these two woodpeckers is about one-and-one-half inches.

We have two species of sapsucker that use aspen for nest sites, the red-naped and the Williamson's. Both are medium-sized woodpeckers about eight-and-one-half inches in length, and yet they dig a tiny hole that doesn't measure much more than an inch in diameter. As the adult birds enter and exit their nest holes, they must wiggle back and forth to get in and out. These tiny nest holes provide nest sites for smaller birds such as wrens and swal-



lows. Sapsuckers dig their nest holes in both live and dead aspens.

The other two species of woodpecker found in Wyoming are the Lewis and the red-headed. These two species are not as likely to be found nesting in aspen— they usually nest in cottonwood trees along waterways. The red-headed is not very common in Wyoming and is usually found only in the extreme eastern portion of the state.

The beautiful aspen tree, with its white bark and quivering round leaves, is a vital part of the forest ecosystem, either alive or dead. While the live aspens are used by a much greater variety of wildlife, once they have died, these trees provide a nursery for a specialized group of birds. They belong to the cavity nesters.

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