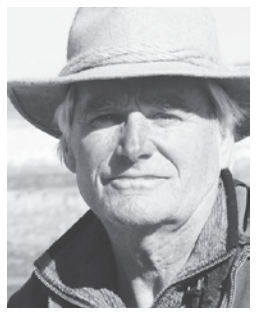
BIRD EXPLORER

# The story of Acorn Woodpeckers

BY PETER J. THIEMANN



Peter J. Thiemann

In the Applegate Valley and all through southern Oregon where there are oak trees, you may find the "clowns" of the woodpecker tribe: the Acorn Woodpeckers. They are highly sociable and visible as they often work in family groups.

**In dead trunks of trees** or in the bark of live trees, they create food storage granaries with many holes. On live trees the holes are shallow and do not penetrate deep or kill a tree. There is one large live ponderosa granary tree in the TouVelle State Recreation Area on the Rogue River that has tens of thousands of acorn storage holes. These granaries are maintained constantly by the woodpecker group and defended by chasing away squirrels and other birds. Half of their food comes from acorns, especially in winter, and in spring and summer they glean insects from new growth in oak trees and even catch them on the fly.

**Acorn woodpeckers breed in colonies** consisting of several male breeders, a number of egg-laying females, and many more male and female nonbreeding helpers. The females lay eggs in common nest cavities and often destroy or remove eggs that have been laid before their own first eggs. None will survive until all females in the group have laid their eggs. When the last eggs are laid, they are incubated by females, and all adults in the group raise the young.

Nonbreeding helpers from outside the group will compete for vacancies, both male and female, to prevent incest. Sometimes helpers have to wait for years while looking for an opportunity to become part of the breeding group of another colony.

By late April, the young Acorn Woodpeckers are fully grown and are looking just like the adults. Sometimes they follow the adults from tree to tree, spreading their wings upon landing on a tree, begging for food. Much activity can be seen around their favorite granary tree holes as parents are stuffing freshly caught insects into holes to be retrieved by a frenzied gang of youngsters—quite a scene!

**As we are experiencing climate change,** it is ever more important to recognize how bird populations adjust. Observing wild birds in natural habitats helps us understand this dynamic process. A decline of a specific bird species has implications far beyond the loss of joy a bird sighting may bring.

The Acorn Woodpecker has two subspecies, one in the dryer Southwest, and the other in the three Pacific states. As the California drought pushes some bird species to the north, we may see the southwestern subspecies of Acorn Woodpecker here in Oregon soon, as has happened with other bird species. Keeping our oak savannah in southern Oregon healthy and intact should be a priority.

Go out to experience the "clowns" of the woodpecker tribe—they are a great show in nature.

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*Acorn Woodpecker photos courtesy of Peter J. Thiemann, Flickr photo stream.*

# 'Nature's benefits' and the Applegate AMA

BY DON BOUCHER

As we shared in the previous edition of the *Applegater*, the US Forest Service (USFS) is developing a strategy to implement needed restoration in the Applegate Adaptive Management Area (AMA). Restoration includes vegetation management, wildlife and aquatic habitat improvement, hazardous-fuels reduction in the interface area adjacent to homes, infrastructure maintenance, and other projects that will help maintain a more resilient ecosystem that is able to withstand major disturbance agents such as fire or insects and address a changing climate. By the end of this summer, we hope to have identified high-priority projects on which to begin work.

**Nature's benefits**

Currently, the Interdisciplinary Team is utilizing an approach that focuses on the benefits that nature provides. These values are sometimes called "ecosystem services," though we prefer the term "nature's benefits." Simply put, nature's benefits are goods and services, including water quantity and quality, timber and nontimber forest products, soil health, wildlife habitat, aquatic habitat, recreation opportunities and cultural enrichment, as well as the intrinsic value of nature, among some others.

This approach is built around three fundamental questions:

1. Why are forests important for human well-being?

2. What ecological structures, processes, and functions sustain the benefits that people value?

3. How does our management affect ecological conditions and benefits?

In other words, this approach is built on understanding the condition of the landscape and implications for sustaining nature's benefits over time. Considering ecosystem services also encourages interdisciplinary understanding across resource areas. For example:

How do soil-plant associations help us identify sites that are suitable for specific uses (forest products, habitat, water quality improvements, etc.)?

How does geologic context help us identify critical groundwater inputs?

Based on our understanding of potential habitats and areas that are critical for delivering wood and gravels for fisheries, which culvert(s) should we prioritize for replacement?

We are also considering how a single, strategically located action could result in multiple benefits across domains. Vegetation treatments, for example, can enhance habitat connectivity, provide structural complexity, reduce fire risk, generate forest products, and contribute to local economic well-being. Understanding ecological context can help us identify sites on the landscape that are most conducive to beneficial outcomes.

This process is participatory and collaborative. There is a great opportunity for coordinated cross-jurisdictional management in the Applegate AMA. Utilizing the adaptive management approach outlined in the Northwest Forest Plan and the Applegate AMA Guide, we can develop methods that will best reflect the needs of the land and communities. Learning will include social and political knowledge, not just biological and physical information.

**"Story maps"**

As part of the planning process, USFS specialists have been developing maps that display key information about the Applegate Watershed. These maps include information on geology, landforms, soils, hydrology, aquatic and terrestrial habitats, plant associations, fire history, infrastructure, insect and disease risk areas, land allocations, fire regimes, and other pertinent information. This isn't by itself unique. What will be beneficial for residents is that this mapped information will be published as a "story map."

A story map will let us present a series of maps on an Internet site to show different data for the same location, such as a set of thematic maps about a sub-watershed. In addition, the user will be able to zoom into an area or pan to look at adjacent areas. These maps will also include images, video, and web content to provide further information.

Though this information is being compiled for USFS lands at this time, we are beginning to engage with specialists from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to expand this work to BLM-managed lands and ultimately, with cooperation from private landowners, cover the entire Applegate Watershed.

Currently, we are beginning the process of engaging with local community members to discuss thoughts and ideas around implementation of restoration projects. Part of the vision is described in the Applegate AMA Guide: "Management actions in the Adaptive Management Area are completed with full public involvement and disclosure. Relationships between communities and agency personnel are open and honest; information is easily accessible."

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