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The Pileated Woodpecker believed to be the muse for the loquacious cartoon character, **Woody Woodpecker**, the pileated woodpecker enters the spotlight this week. At 16-19 inches in length – comparable to a crow -- it is Canada's largest woodpecker and fairly easy to discern from our other resident tree tappers. The pileated has a mostly black body with black and white facial stripes that extend down toward the wings and chest. In flight, its under wings are mostly white. Both sexes have a bright red crest on their head, but only the male has a red forehead and red "moustache."

The pileated requires unbroken swaths of older growth forests or younger forests that have plenty of decaying wood. Like Woody, it has a big "laugh," too -- a sharp "kuk-kuk-kuk" call that pierces the forest and alerts you to its presence. It drums forcefully on trees, producing a slow yet resonant hammering sound that can carry for 1 kilometre. Drumming is a way to attract a mate, announce a year-round territory, or warn of a threat. A pileated will also drum to summon its mate from another location within their territory.

I am especially fond of the pileated woodpecker because it is especially fond of carpenter ants which are especially fond of my cottage. In a quest for carpenters and their colonies, it uses its powerful, dagger-like bill to chisel and pry the bark off rotting limbs and trees. A long, barbed tongue is then plunged into the holes and crevices to drag out the ants. A pileated also devours beetle larvae, caterpillars and other insects, as well as fruits and nuts. It is possible to tell what kind of woodpecker was working on a tree or log based on clues it leaves behind. If you notice a big pile of sizable wood chips at the base of a tree or alongside a log, it is likely the work of a pileated. This avian lumberjack also bores large, deep, rectangular-shaped holes in trees. These holes can be big enough to weaken thinner trees, causing them to break in half. Occasionally, when a pair of pileated woodpeckers (they mate for life) excavates a nest site within a telephone pole, it may be compromised to the point of snapping, as the finished cavity can be 8 inches wide by 2 feet deep. More typically, though, they bore a nest site within a large tree or in a standing dead tree, called a "snag." The female lays 2-4 eggs, and while both parents share incubation duties during the day, the male always sits the nightshift. They try hard to defend the nest from tree-climbing snakes and other predators. Due to the typical placement of nests in tall trees, there is also a threat of lightning strikes. If the parents decide the original nest is unsafe, they may carry the eggs to another nest site. Youngsters hatch in a little over 2 weeks and remain with their parents until the fall.

In past centuries, the pileated woodpecker suffered due to systematic logging, but as the forests regenerated, the bird did, too. You can attract and support this species by leaving some standing deadwood and decaying logs on your property. These provide both food sources and nest sites. Competition for snags is fierce among cavity nesters like the pileated, eastern bluebird and yellow-bellied sapsucker. However, the pileated may share a roosting hole with swifts and even bats, while other creatures, like wood ducks and martens, benefit from all the holes this big beauty leaves behind.

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Margie is a self-proclaimed nature nerd with a passion for all things finned, furred and feathered...even the creepy-crawly-scaly kinds. She's summered on Wolfe Lake since childhood and loves sharing what she learns about our wild things.