

## THE OUTDOORS PAGE

# Owls and Woodpeckers



Their symbiotic relationship helps assess the health and viability of their habitats



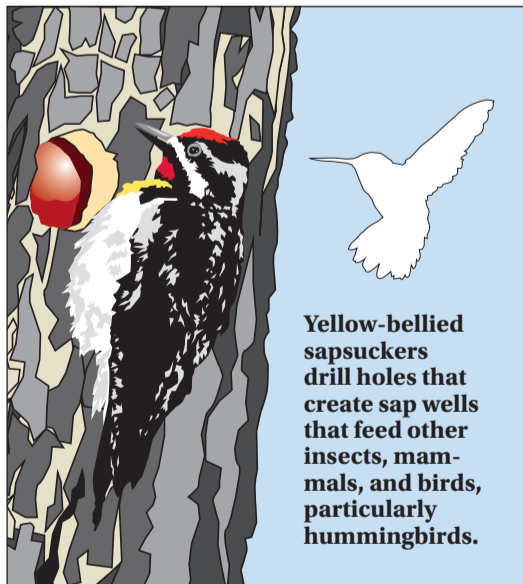
Eastern screech owl ART WEBER



Barred owl ART WEBER



Great horned owl ART WEBER



Yellow-bellied sapsuckers drill holes that create sap wells that feed other insects, mammals, and birds, particularly hummingbirds.

By MATT MARKEY and JEFF BASTING

They are not adversaries, but at first glance, they could hardly be considered great friends.

Owls are birds of prey, stealthy hunters of the night that strike with powerful talons to satisfy a fierce, carnivorous appetite. Woodpeckers are much more methodical workers, endlessly jumping from tree to tree and hammering away to forage for grubs and insects, while also using the holes they excavate to build nests.

Their common bond would seem to be limited to feathers and flight, but they have a much more complex and symbiotic relationship, and one that is valued in assessing the health and viability of certain habitats.

Photographer and naturalist Paul Bannick of Seattle has spent thousands of hours traversing the wild places on the North American continent, on foot, by kayak, and on snowshoes, and has chronicled the way these two families of birds tell us much about the places where they live. Included in that list of owl and woodpecker ecosystem duplexes is the Oak Openings region west of Toledo.

Mr. Bannick, whose stunning photos of these birds are currently on display at the National Center for Nature Photography at Secor Metropark in Oak Openings, details in his book *The Owl and The Woodpecker* the critical roles they play in essentially providing us with a readout of the vital signs of sensitive ecosystems.

The author describes owls and woodpeckers as indicator species and as keystone species in vital habitats. Some species are highly dependent on critical natural elements of their environment, such as old growth trees, and when these elements are degraded, vulnerable owls and woodpeckers are severely affected, Mr. Bannick said. The health of their populations pro-

vides a measure of the health of the entire ecosystem, thus making them an indicator.

The keystone species, as Mr. Bannick describes it, improves habitat that will support a wide range of other species. There are a multitude of insects, amphibians, mammals, and many birds other than owls that rely on woodpeckers to create the cavities they need for



Seattle photographer Paul Bannick

nesting and food.

Owls aid woodpeckers by keeping rodent populations in check, and limiting the loss of eggs and the destruction of woodpecker nests by these pests.

"Owls are at the top of their food web and that often makes them indicators attesting to the health of the ecosystems they inhabit," Mr. Bannick said. "Woodpeckers, while often indicator species as well, are also keystone species, since they create sap-wells and excavations that benefit many other animals that use these cavities, including the 10 species of owls that use their cavities for nest sites."

Mr. Bannick visited Oak Openings recently, and found what he called "an area incredibly rich with woodpeckers," with multiple varieties and a large population of eastern screech owls. The holes woodpeckers open in trees provide housing and nutrition for the other inhabitants of Oak Openings.

"There is such a diversity of habitat in that region," Mr. Bannick said. "And you've got several spe-

cies of woodpeckers living there, and all of them create cavities in trees — cavities that the eastern screech owls here benefit from."

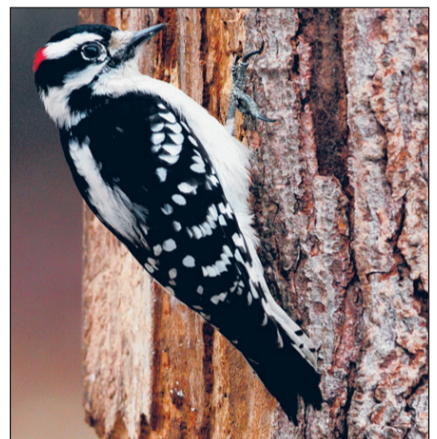
Oak Openings is a band of sandy soil that stretches through Henry and Fulton counties and across the Michigan line, spread out several miles wide in most areas. The Oak Openings region is one of the most rare ecosystems on the planet, and tabbed by the Nature Conservancy as "One of America's Last Great Places."

Oak Openings is home to more endangered native plant species than any other place in the Buckeye State, and home to owls and woodpeckers. Winter is an ideal time for visitors to Secor Metropark to catch a glimpse of owls hunting at dusk, or see woodpeckers as their rapid-fire pounding echoes through the scattered forest during the day. The exhibit at the National Center for Nature Photography includes images of the 19 owl and 22 woodpecker species that call North America home.

"If this were an exhibit on wood rats or mosquitoes, I'm not sure people would be all that excited, but these are such beautiful birds, besides being so important," said Art Weber, a nature photographer and writer who served as Metroparks public information manager for three decades. "A number of these woodpeckers and owls prefer an area like Oak Openings, so we can see this unique relationship play out right here every day."

Mr. Bannick, who has observed owls and woodpeckers in the Arctic tundra, the desert, the grasslands and shrub steppe, western forests, eastern forests and boreal forests, and in the pine and oak woodlands, said that for many owls and woodpeckers, the connections are especially pronounced.

"Most people are surprised by the relationship and the degree to which it goes," Mr. Bannick said. "But this relationship reminds us that everything is connected."



Downy woodpecker ART WEBER

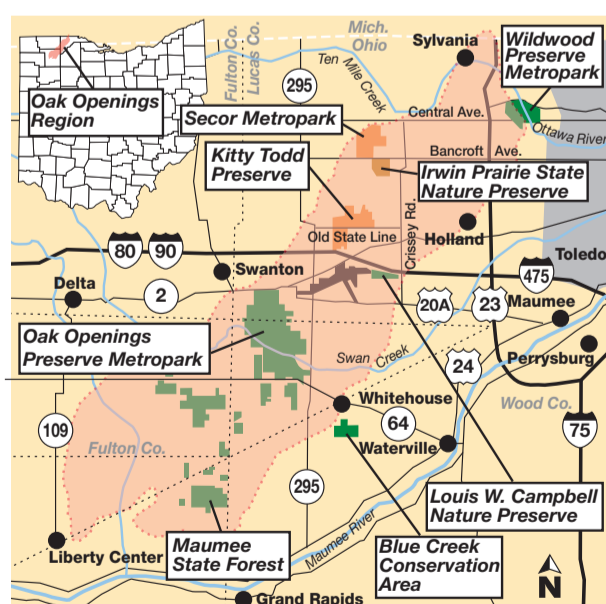


Red-headed woodpecker ART WEBER



Red-bellied woodpecker ART WEBER

### OAK OPENINGS REGION



SOURCE: ODNR

### Critical Connections



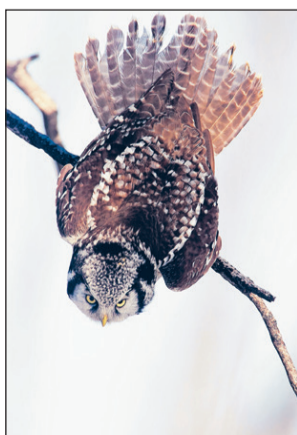
Indicator species are highly dependent on critical natural elements of their environment. When these elements are degraded, many species are severely impacted. Keystone species improve habitat by creating nesting cavities or food sources that in turn support a wide range of species.

### IF YOU GO

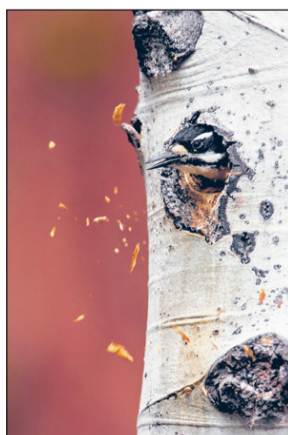
#### The Owl and the Woodpecker photo exhibit

■ **When:** open noon to 5 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays through Feb. 16. Special holiday open house receptions with light refreshments will be offered today and next weekend. The exhibit is free and everyone is welcome.

■ **Where:** National Center for Nature Photography in Secor Metropark, west of Toledo.



Northern hawk owl



Hairy woodpecker



Northern pygmy owl



Pileated woodpecker



Snowy owl

PHOTOS/PAUL BANNICK

These photos are part of 'The Owl and the Woodpecker' exhibition of Paul Bannick's work that is on display at the National Center for Nature Photography at Secor Metropark. The center is also hosting a special program on owls in conjunction with Nature's Nursery, and a photo shoot on woodpeckers. Contact the Nature Center for times and dates, or go to [www.naturephotocenter.com](http://www.naturephotocenter.com) or [www.metroparkstoledo.com](http://www.metroparkstoledo.com) for more information.