

# LISTEN, LOOK & LEARN

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Big Gull has always been an overwhelming almost magical setting full of plenty of animals to observe. When I first started coming to the cottage at age 5, I learned from my older brother to always keep my senses ready for the sounds of something interesting in the forest. Once you hear something, you can now focus on trying to figure out where the noise is coming from. I call this my “listen, look and learn” challenge. Nature doesn’t reveal itself easily, but with patients you can sneak up toward the sound and usually get a quick look at what it is...deer, grouse, wild turkeys or even mink. All animals have a great sense of smell and hearing to determine danger, but to them humans look just like a tree if you creep up slowly, so they usually don’t feel threatened and carrying on foraging.

My favourite sighting is the Pileated Woodpecker, one of the most colourful and biggest birds in the forests around Big Gull. You may not have seen one, but I know you’ve heard them and seen the big rectangular holes in pine trees. It’s crazy how a bird can chisel deep holes into these massive trees!

## DESCRIPTION:

- One of the biggest woodpeckers in North America, roughly the size of a crow
- Black with a white face and bold white stripes running down the neck. The head has a prominent bright flaming red crest, cap and red chests, (males have a red mustache at the side of their face) with a large grey bill. White under side of the wings are visible in flight when the wings are extended. It has a long tail to help anchor itself when chiseling into trees.
- The striking size of the bird and its pointed head, or the wing beat pattern in flight that make it look almost prehistoric as it swoops and glides through the air.



## HABITAT:

- Mature forests with plenty of dead trees or snags. They are constantly whacking at dead trees and fallen logs in search of their main prey...carpenter ants! This is why you see the distinctive rectangular holes in the wood.
- The nest is inside the cavity of a large tree, which they carve out in preparation each spring for a new clutch of eggs. These excavations are so wide and deep they often cause the tree to break in half.
- A single tree could have up to 16 holes to allow for escape routes should a predator enter their tree. They peck the bark around the entrance to make the sap run down the tree, creating a sticky river of sap to keep predators from attacking the nest, especially climbing rat snakes from entering and stealing eggs.
- They drum on hollow trees with their bills in order to claim territory
- Both males and females “roost” in separate burrowed holes in the tree and do not sleep together.



## BEHAVIOR:

- As a bark forager in search of ants and other bugs to eat, they continually dig holes. To make the rectangular cuts in soft trees, the bird use their long muscular necks to pull far back from the tree, then make powerful strikes with their heavy bills, pulling with their feet to increase the strength of the blow.
- They must hold a large area of the forest as their territory, so they drum on hollow trees keep other woodpeckers from moving into their region. The sounds of their hammering can be heard many kilometers away.
- Its drumming is done at a rate of 15 beats per second. On an average day it will peck 16,000 times!



## BREEDING:

- The female has one brood per season. Both parents incubate the eggs, the male taking on the night shift. The nest is never left alone once the eggs are hatched. The eggs are semi-gloss white, flatly rounded on each end to prevent rolling.
- The hatchlings are born naked, most feathers erupt by day 7, are climbing the inside of the cavity by day 13, begin peeking out the hole by day 20. In

just a 3-week period they are 75% full grown. The young are fed by regurgitation; the parent inserts bill into throat of young, who sucks and jerks its head while parent spit-up food they have collected. For several months they rely on the parents to feed them, at least until September.

- In the fall the young leave their parents and wander until the following spring. By this time they have acquired their own territory and a mate.

## NESTING:

- Pileated Woodpeckers mate for life and do not migrate; they stay throughout the extreme winter in the deep nest cavities.
- In early April, the male begins excavating the nest and does most of the work. The female will contribute when the nest is near completion.
- For the finishing touches the bird climbs all the way into the hole and chips away at it from the inside. They will clean up the wood chips in the beaks and pitch them out the hole, creating a large pile at the base of the tree.
- Construction takes 3-6 weeks to complete. They rarely reuse a nest from each season, providing new homes for other forest creatures.

## DIET:

- Over half of its diet are carpenter ants, but also eat wood boring beetle larvae, which require them to gouge out large rectangular holes and search deep into a tree. They actually listen to insect movement inside the tree to target their prey.
- They obtain their food by scaling bark off trees and creating excavations in the trees to expose ant galleries.
- Other food sources are beetles, moths, mosquitoes, caterpillars, grasshoppers. They eat small amounts of nuts and berries too...blackberry, poison ivy berries and even acorns.







- A specialized tongue with an assortment of backward barbs near the tip to assist with racking insects into the mouth. It also produces large amounts of sticky saliva that coats the tongue, making it easier to capture insects.
- Pileated Woodpeckers have a relatively short tongue, as their rip into wood rather than flick the tongue into the narrow tunnels ants make.
- Not currently listed as a “threatened” or “endangered”, but is a “protected species”.



#### FACTOIDS:

- The oldest known Pileated Woodpecker was almost 13 years old.
- Predators include martens, squirrels, rat snakes, various hawks and owls.
- Their brain is protected by a spongy elastic material between their bill and skull that hold their brain snugly and provides a cushion. This keeps their brains from getting injured while they bang away at trees with great force. It can strike a tree trunk at around 20 times per-second, with the same force as if you would hit your face against a wall at around 25 kms per hour.
- They have special membranes over their eyes that close each time their beak strikes the wood. The membrane protects the eye from debris, combined with a bladder around their eye which will swell with blood to increase pressure on the eye ball, which holds it in place to prevent it from “popping out” as they peck away.
- The beak is self-sharpening, chisel-like, that moves into wood rather than stopping it abruptly. It acts almost as a dart would penetrate.



# KIDS CORNER!!



## NUTTY IDEA:

- Here's a fun idea...plant an acorn and watch it grow for years to come
- When you do your cottage clean up in the spring, while raking leaves look for an acorn which has just started to sprout. You'll see a green root coming out of the bottom of the shell.
- Fill up plastic yogurt tub with some soil and place the acorn just below the surface of the soil, be sure the root is facing down. Cover it with earth and water it.
- Over the next few weeks the shell will pop out of the soil and finally come apart, revealing some bright green leaves. Your tree is beginning to grow!
- Keep the watering going and make sure it get plenty of light.
- As it gets taller, it will need to be transplanted into a bigger pot and by late summer ready be planted outside in a spot around the cottage for you to watch for years to come.

## Forest Animals



v	c	o	e	j	o	t	b	e	a	r	r
i	x	s	j	p	w	y	f	v	n	l	a
m	s	f	d	o	l	r	o	d	h	y	b
s	k	o	y	r	o	s	x	e	i	x	b
u	u	r	k	c	v	q	t	e	i	o	i
q	n	e	q	u	o	u	g	r	u	j	t
n	k	s	w	p	k	i	l	p	n	h	q
a	b	t	o	i	g	r	g	y	x	u	n
j	c	r	l	n	x	r	c	i	e	w	e
c	b	x	f	e	h	e	w	q	e	x	o
p	k	k	p	f	f	l	s	h	z	p	m
w	r	a	c	c	o	o	n	t	q	l	y

forest	deer	bear	fox
owl	raccoon	squirrel	
rabbit	skunk	wolf	porcupine



## MAZE



## GROWTH CHART:

- Our children are all adults now, but we still have their growth chart on an old cabinet which brings plenty of laughs when guests are at the cottage.
- Put you back against the door and have someone put a ruler on top of your head and mark the door to measure your height. Put your name and date next to the line and at the end of summer measure again.
- It's a fun way to watch your body grow some years more than others.

