

Closer to confirmation

BY GEOFF HOGAN



What is the status of the Pileated Woodpecker (Dryocopus pileatus) on Prince Edward Island? Until recently I would have said that the species has been exterminated from the Island since the turn of the century. In 1891 Island naturalist Francis Bain wrote the following observation of Pileated Woodpeckers in his publication Birds of Prince Edward Island: "The great Black Woodpecker, or Logcock, is a lonely bird of the forest, but rarely seen now in the cleared state of our country" Certainly by 1954 when W. Earl Godfrey published his version of the Birds of Prince Edward Island he concluded that the Pileated Woodpecker was "apparently extirpated" from the Island.

Over the past few decades there has been an occasional glimmer of hope that this majestic species may be staging return. On May 24, 1963 Captain E. Holdway spotted a pair in flight in the vicinity of Wood Islands. In 1966 evidence of their borings in trees were noted by Stan Vass and Lou Daly at the Head of Brudenell. Then in early June 1979 George Smith observed what he believed was a Pileated Woodpecker in his blueberry field in Mounty Vernon, not far from Wood Islands. George described the bird to his wife Bernice as being "as big as a crow...black, with

white along the side of the neck and almost a bandit's mask over the eyes and a large red crest." Well, that certainly fits the description for a female Pileated Woodpecker! Other unconfirmed sightings have also come from the Lorne Valley area in central Kings County in the early 1980's.

On October 6, 1987 I came across some additional evidence that the Pileated Woodpecker is indeed on Prince Edward Island. While walking through the woodlands on the Greenwich-Cable Head peninsula I discovered fresh borings made by the Pileated Woodpecker. These borings are highly distinctive because of their size, shape and location on the tree. Various authors have described Pileated Woodpecker borings. According to Squires (1976) writing in The Birds of New Brunswick: "Although this, our largest woodpecker, is seen seldom its presence in a woodlot may be noted by examining the holes dug in trees by woodpeckers looking for ants or other insects. If the holes tend to have square corners the Pileated Woodpecker has been present." Salt and Salt (1976) noted "Often a Pileated Woodpecker works within a foot or so of the ground as it excavates nests of carpenter ants. A pile of large chips at the base of a tree identifies the work of this species." Even Francis Bain (1891) observed that..."the amount of chips that it will knock out of a decayed stump which it supposes to contain a meal of grubs, is something astonishing." All of these descriptions fit the borings that I found at Greenwich. The square-edged holes were several inches long, two inches deep, frequently close to the base of the tree and, beneath the fresh drillings, there were piles of large chips. Virtually all of the borings observed on October 6, and again on October 7 with Diane Griffin, Jackie Waddell and John Vessey, were in spruce trees. Generally, but not always, these were large, dead or dying trees. Since these observations were made other borings have been noticed elsewhere in Kings County but they were not fresh. With fresh borings the exposed wood is still white and has sap