

The Most Unlikely Zoo Animal Ambassador

This zoo recently introduced a new addition to their Ambassador Animal Program, a program that offers up-close experiences with guests. Norman, who lost his home and mobility to loggers, is blazing the trail as the first of his kind to become an ambassador.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Norman, a pileated woodpecker, is the first of his kind to become an animal ambassador at the John Ball Zoo in Grand Rapids, MI
- Norman is a young bird who lost his nest when the tree it was in was cut down. He also broke a leg, and due to his young age and time to rehab, zoo staff determined he would never learn to be a wild woodpecker who could live safely in the wild
- The pileated woodpecker, with his dashing red crest, is the largest woodpecker in North America
- The birds have incredibly strong beaks that make it possible to excavate trees to find their preferred food (carpenter ants), and build nests deep into tree trunks

According to a recent news item, the John Ball Zoo in Grand Rapids, MI is introducing a new addition to their Ambassador Animal Program — a **pileated woodpecker named Norman**.¹ (“Pileated” means having a crest over the pileum, or top of the bird’s head.)

Norman is a youngster and was rescued by a rehabilitation veterinarian after the tree holding his nest was cut down, and his leg was broken. The vet was able to repair his leg and nurse him back to health and was hopeful he could be returned to the wild.

Unfortunately, because he was so young when he was injured, coupled with the care needed to repair his leg, the zoo staff determined that Norman wasn’t able to learn how to be a wild woodpecker, and wouldn’t be safe returning to the wild.

Norman Will Be the First Ever Pileated Woodpecker Ambassador

Instead, they decided to place him in their Ambassador Animal Program, which includes reptiles, birds, small mammals, and insects who choose to participate in up-close experiences with guests visiting the zoo, and during off-site Travel Zoo programs. Zoo ambassador animals help teach the community about wildlife.

As the only pileated woodpecker ambassador in the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), Norman’s caretakers will be in a unique position to learn more about the species’ history and behavior and help their bird blaze a trail as the first ambassador of his kind.

“We have been working with Norman daily to better understand his behavior, and we continue to learn new things every day,” said Erin Maloney, one of his primary trainers. “We’ve seen him make great progress in his comfort level in new situations and have begun taking him on ‘walks’ throughout the zoo to meet guests.

It’s really exciting to have Norman in our program. Pileated woodpeckers are native to West Michigan and can be heard in our backyards, but few people have seen them up close. Seeing Norman is an extra special connection for guests.”²

Largest Woodpecker in North America

Norman isn’t just any old woodpecker. The pileated woodpecker is the largest woodpecker in North America, nearly as big as a crow (15 to 19 inches). These birds are black with bold white stripes down the neck plus that amazing flaming-red crest. During flight, large, white underwing patches are visible.

Pileated woodpeckers mean business as they drill deep into rotten wood to get to the nests of their favorite food, carpenter ants. They leave their calling card after a hammering session — rectangular holes in dead trees that provide crucial shelter to many other bird species, including swifts, owls, ducks, bats, and pine martens.

Habitat and Diet

Pileated woodpeckers go for soft wood because that’s where they find carpenter ants. They also gravitate to trees big enough to accommodate the large nest cavities they excavate. This means that old-growth forests and Douglas fir trees are an ideal habitat.

Pileated woodpeckers inhabit relatively large territories year-round and are found from northern California up into Canada and back down into much of the eastern U.S., wherever there are big trees and decaying wood. These birds defend their territory with loud drumming and ringing calls.

Along with ants (which make up to 60% of their diet) and other insects, the pileated woodpecker also eats termites, and the larvae of wood-boring beetles. About one-quarter of the diet may be wild fruits, berries, and nuts.

The woodpeckers use their long, barbed tongue to extract woodboring beetle larvae (which can be more than an inch long) or termites lying deep in the wood. When hammering into soft wood, they use their long neck to pull far back from the tree, then make powerful strikes with their heavy bill, while simultaneously pulling with their feet to increase the strength of each strike. The sound is a heavy thunk, and large chips of wood pile up on the ground below.

Nesting

Male pileated woodpeckers do the heavy lifting when it comes to excavating a nest cavity for family time. The entrance to the nest is oblong rather than the usual circular shape of most woodpecker holes. Once the cavity is dug, the birds (both male and female) climb into the hole for a little interior decorating, pecking away at it from the inside, tossing out wood chips as they go. Leftover wood chips provide the lining, such as it is, for the nest. Start-to-finish construction usually takes three to six weeks, since the depth of the cavity can range from 10 inches up to two feet!

Female woodpeckers lay between three and five eggs, and both sexes participate in incubation chores for about 18 days. Both parents also feed their young by regurgitation. The young birds leave the nest 26 to 28 days after hatching but may remain with their parents for two to three months.

Pileated woodpeckers are monogamous and inhabit large territories; it's rare to see more than two birds together at a time. When one member of a pair dies, the remaining bird often finds a new mate. This is one of the primary ways that new individuals get a chance to breed and hold a territory.

Sources and References

[Audubon Guide to North American Birds](#)

[All About Birds \(The Cornell Lab\)](#)

[National Park Service](#)

^{1, 2} [MLive, August 1, 2022](#)
