



# Celebrating the Stumpbreaker of Squirrel Hill

An Obliging Pileated Woodpecker Breaks Ground with Urban Wildlife Watchers

**B**irders know the importance of public parks in urban areas. We've all heard stories from the ABA Area's many famed urban birding hotspots of how avian symbols of the wild can be found even in the heart of our cities. These tales of urban birds are responsible for inspiring a not small number of birders to dedicate their entire lives to the wonder of birds. In Pittsburgh, Pileated Woodpeckers, an icon of the deep woods, have become fairly reliable in Frick Park, a well-birded hotspot in the sprawling neighborhood of Squirrel Hill. Veteran Pittsburgh birders say that even the idea of a Pileated Woodpecker anywhere in the city was once shocking, even inconceivable.

In my experience, this powerful woodpecker is a decently challenging bird to photograph well. Views are frequently obscured by branches and leaves, and the bird is often high above—far from the ideal angle for a portrait. And as with most woodpecker sightings, photographers must contend with the bird's habit of circling around the trunk it clings to as it probes for food. Or, often enough, the only sighting of the day will be the bird streaking through the trees and away, its cackles reverberating through the forest.

**T**o obtain photos of an urban Pileated as part of *Birding's* January issue coverage and celebration of our 2021 Bird of the Year (see p. 38 in Nick Minor's article in this issue), I set out on a sun-

ny fall Friday morning, Nov. 6, 2020. My strategy was to first hike through a ridgeline trail that partially overlooks the treetops, where I have on occasion seen Pileateds. With luck, I would get a close-to-eye-level photo. But after an hour and a half of sweet-whistling, berry-gorging waxwings on high and mixed sparrow flocks down low, no Pileated was to be found. So I tried Plan B: Walk through the low-lying Falls Ravine Trail, another location where I frequently encounter the bird. If I was lucky enough to even find one, it would almost certainly be far above or darting through the trees.

Sure enough, just a little way in, I spotted a Pileated, feeding calmly about 30 feet high. One small footbridge with wooden guardrails gave me a place to climb up and precariously take some photos at a slightly preferable angle, but I still wasn't thrilled with the shots. The bird did humor me by staying in the same area for a good 10 minutes, but it didn't move any lower, and I prepared to go home.

Then it occurred to me that if I clambered up the steep, leaf-blanketed hill sloping *away* from the bird, owing to this Pileated's nonchalance and apparent satisfaction with its present feeding prospects, I might get decent eye-level-ish shots. They would be far from frame-filling, but could later be cropped. So I trudged up, nearly slipped a number of times, and drew stares from passersby. Just as I was beginning to snap a few more pics, the bird once known as the log-guard, the carpenter bird, and a host of other interesting names

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*Photo by © Frank Izaguirre.*



descended to half the height, only about 15 feet off the ground. I slid down the hill, hoping not to spook this indulgent bird, and then, miracle of miracles, as I lifted the camera the bird came right down to the ground on a rotted-out log just beside the trail.

I took photos. A lot of photos. And as I took an inordinate amount of Pileated Woodpecker headshots, a couple of speedwalkers stopped to look. The bird—it's easy to forget how big it is—hunkered over the log and hacked with animus, launching fragments of wood and memory in all directions.

"Excuse me: What are you looking at? Is that a *Pileated Woodpecker*?" one of them asked me, exaggeratedly drawing out the bird's name.

"Yes! I have never had one pose this well for a photo."

"Oh, that's fantastic. Right when quarantine started, I started noticing a Pileated Woodpecker coming to my feeders. It would bang on the fence!"

These impromptu Picidae spectators were fascinated by the concept of urban Pileated Woodpeckers. After interviewing me, they began talking among themselves and with others in the growing crowd about Pileated Woodpeckers, all enjoying our *Dryocopus* compan-

ion as he intermittently whacked this soggy log to bits while posing for glamor shots. Enough people stopped by—families, bicyclists, joggers, none of them visiting the park primarily to bird and yet all of them delighting in this bird—that I eventually took out my phone to document the scene. Even as some people left, they were replaced by others. One man who had taken out his point-and-shoot for the Pileated came running back, saying he had to show me something he thought I'd want to see.

He was right. The entire time all of us had been gawking at our Pileated performer, a red-morph Eastern Screech-owl had been comfortably perched in a roost just above us. The scene—a Pileated Woodpecker, its many unscripted admirers, and a peacefully resting screech-owl poised above—continued for what felt like a long time. But not forever. Eventually, people began peeling away, and soon enough just a few were left, despite the woodpecker still whacking and sculpting away, until eventually he, too, after briefly duetting with another Pileated somewhere out of view, hurled his heavy frame into the air and in a mere moment crossed the ravine and out of sight. The owl remained, almost invisible in its well-hidden arboreal abode, but the people were gone, each of them outfitted with a new tale, their own fragment of the day, of the wonder of urban birds. 🌲



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