

Pepper

We don't see a lot of acorn woodpeckers at Project Wildlife. In fact, last year only two came through our Care Center. The reason? These birds tend to reside in oak and pine-oak woodland, away from much of the human population. This also means you won't see them as often as the house finches and crows that adapt quite well to human communities.

Because people see or notice these birds so rarely, we at Project Wildlife are thrilled to house a female acorn woodpecker, named Pepper, as an Education Ambassador. This bright-eyed and peppy bird arrived at our Care Center in 2008. She was one of three chicks, found in the trunk of a tree that had been cut down. Due to her poor health and an unfortunate series of events, she lost the upper part of her beak, breaking it off so close to her face that it will not re-grow. Beaks are made out of keratin, just like fingernails, hair, and feathers. However, the loss of part of the beak is much more serious than that of a single toenail, and this injury would prevent Pepper from providing for herself in the wild. Although Pepper is on a modified diet, she still happily pecks at wood, breaks apart nuts, and drinks nectar. She has even found a new fun food item: crane flies that she grabs with her tongue!



Acorn woodpeckers are a smaller woodpecker species found near the West Coast, from Oregon to Baja California and from the Southern Rockies through Central America all the way down to Columbia. They can be identified by their light-colored eyes, distinct black and white pattern, and red crown. They produce a variety of sounds, including a kind of "waka-waka" and an up-and-down raspy trill that almost sounds like laughter. Legend has it that Walter Lantz created his character Woody Woodpecker based on the "laughter" and antics of woodpecker species.

Much of the diet of the acorn woodpecker is composed of fruit, sap, flower nectar (they will also drink from hummingbird feeders), seeds, and insects. However, in North America, 50% of their diet is made up of acorns. They even store acorns for the colder months when less food is available by pecking holes in the bark of trees and then pounding acorns into those holes. The tree that each group uses is called a granary, and these trees can be seen along our inland and mountain hiking trails. The largest granary on record, in the San Jacinto Mountains, held up to 50,000 acorns.

The nests of acorn woodpeckers are usually made in hollows of the granary tree or another tree nearby. As Pepper's story shows, it is important to check trees for bird nests before trimming the limbs or cutting the entire tree down. Because our weather is so wonderful that birds nest most of the year in the area, we should be cautious any time we are working on trees and brush. In San Diego, tree trimming and cutting should only be attempted in the late fall and early winter; in fact, December is the best month for these activities.

Because of her story and her own antics, Pepper is a joy to have in our Education Ambassador program. She delights adults and children alike. For more information on our Education Program, please visit our [Education Page](#) or contact Kirstin DeGeer, Education and Outreach Manager, at education@projectwildlife.org or (858) 866-0555 x208.