



THE RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER

A Red-bellied Woodpecker can stick out its tongue nearly 2 inches past the end of its beak. The tip is barbed, and the bird's spit is sticky, making it easier to snatch prey from deep crevices.

You may sometimes see Red-bellied Woodpeckers wedge large nuts into bark crevices, then whack them into manageable pieces using their beaks. They also use cracks in trees and fence posts to store food for later in the year, a habit it shares with other woodpeckers in its genus.

For birds that nest in cavities, nest holes are precious turf. Red-bellied Woodpeckers have been known to take over the nests of other birds, including the much smaller (and endangered) Red-cockaded Woodpecker. But more often they're victims of the aggressive European Starling. As many as half of all Red-bellied Woodpecker nests in some areas get invaded by starlings.

You may occasionally see a Red-bellied Woodpecker flying quickly and erratically through the forest, abruptly changing direction, alighting for an instant and immediately taking off again, keeping up a quick chatter of calls. Scientists categorize this odd behavior as a type of play that probably helps young birds practice the evasive action, they may one day need.