



Background paper:

# The white-backed woodpecker, highly threatened by forestry

By Arnodd Håpnes, forest officer. WWF-Norway, March 2003

**Let's give our children a living forest where there is room for species like the white-backed woodpecker. Protection and restoring of ecologically suitable forest habitats are key factors for saving the white-backed woodpecker.**

The white-backed woodpecker (*Dendrocopos leucotos*) was once the most common woodpecker in southern Norway and Sweden (see distribution map). Today, most of the old-growth forests are gone, and so is the White-backed woodpecker. Only on the steep forested slopes on the western coast of Norway there are still pristine forests suitable for housing this species. Here we still find a strong and viable population, counting around 1700 nesting pairs. This counts for 90% of the Fennoscandian population. From this population Norway exports living birds to Sweden for the purpose of restoring the White-backed woodpecker population there.

**Indicator species:** Woodpeckers, and the White-backed woodpecker in particular, are among the best *indicators of biological diversity* in the forest. It requires larger areas of forest with much greater shares of deciduous trees and a higher share of dead or dying trees than found in typically managed forest landscapes. The occurrence of broad-leaf trees and dead wood is among the most important conditions for most of the threatened fauna and flora in the forest. Large shares of broad-leaf trees and dead wood characterize forests of a more undisturbed character. These habitats are today few in number and they are fragmented. This means that preservation work must be combined with restoration and re-establishment.

Forestry in Eastern Norway and Southern Sweden has to a high extent wiped out the old growth deciduous forests and the woodpecker

habitats. The white-backed woodpecker is an important indicator of how we are managing our forests landscapes. If it finds the habitat suitable, you will also find a lot of other rare and threatened species in the same area.

**Vulnerable:** The white-backed woodpecker is regarded as vulnerable on the “red list of threatened and rare species in Norway”. The woodpecker is dependent on larvae and insects living in old stumps and standing dead wood. In contrast to other woodpeckers, it cannot change its diet to cone seeds during the winter. It still needs to feed on frozen insects in dead wood even during the strong and cold Norwegian winter. Forestry, replacing dead wood and deciduous trees with monoculture spruce forests, is considered as the biggest threat to this beautiful bird.



White-backed woodpecker. Photo: Tom Schandy



**Habitat protection:** Protection of the last remaining big areas of old growth forests, including dead wood and deciduous trees, is one important tool for helping this bird to find its way back to the old distribution areas. Restoring of natural habitats is also necessary to give this species new, livable habitats, as they do in the Swedish project.

The white-backed woodpecker is crucially dependent on protection of its habitat, but it is also dependent on a restoration program including development of a far better forestry practice. This should secure production of standing dead wood and give room for natural mixed forests with a much higher proportion of deciduous trees.

Old deciduous forests in western Norway are important habitats for the remaining white-backed woodpeckers.  
Photo: Rune Aanderaa

