The holes in your tree are being made by a "Yellow-bellied Sapsucker", a species of woodpecker that doesn't have a yellow belly and doesn't "suck" the sap! They do however, rely primarily on tree sap as their main food source and they get to it by drilling ¼" diameter holes (called "wells") into the tree. As the sap oozes into the wells, the sapsucker uses its brush-like tongue to lap up it up. Hummingbirds and other birds and bats also use the sapsucker wells for feeding. Insects that are attracted to the sap also make up the sapsuckers menu. Sapsuckers have been observed to drill holes in over 1000 types of trees and woody shrubs, but they have a strong preference for trees with high sugar content in their sap. Their favorites include fruit trees (and their fruit), paper birch, beech, sugar maple, red maple, hickory and pines. You will often see tree sap running down the bark from sapsucker wells and although this looks terrible, is generally doesn't cause the tree much of a problem. Trees can be threatened if the sapsucker damage is extensive with a large number of holes that go all the way around the tree. If you want to protect your tree during the months the sapsuckers are here, you can use a loose wrap of burlap or hardware cloth (metal mesh) around the area of the holes. Yellow-bellied sapsuckers are unique in that they are the only species of woodpecker that is truly migratory. They are here with us in the spring, summer and early fall and head south as far a Central America, Texas and the Bahamas in the late fall and winter. In addition, yellow-bellied sapsuckers are the only species of woodpecker that uses live trees for feeding. Yellow-bellied sapsuckers are classified as migratory non-game birds and are protected by the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act; it is against the law to kill or harm them.

Linda’s Answer:

The holes in your tree are being made by a "Yellow-bellied Sapsucker", a species of woodpecker that doesn't have a yellow belly and doesn't "suck" the sap! They do however, rely primarily on tree sap as their main food source and they get to it by drilling ¼" diameter holes (called "wells") into the tree. As the sap oozes into the wells, the sapsucker uses its brush-like tongue to lap up it up. Hummingbirds and other birds and bats also use the sapsucker wells for feeding. Insects that are attracted to the sap also make up the sapsuckers menu. Sapsuckers have been observed to drill holes in over 1000 types of trees and woody shrubs, but they have a strong preference for trees with high sugar content in their sap. Their favorites include fruit trees (and their fruit), paper birch, beech, sugar maple, red maple, hickory and pines. You will often see tree sap running down the bark from sapsucker wells and although this looks terrible, is generally doesn’t cause the tree much of a problem. Trees can be threatened if the sapsucker damage is extensive with a large number of holes that go all the way around the tree. If you want to protect your tree during the months the sapsuckers are here, you can use a loose wrap of burlap or hardware cloth (metal mesh) around the area of the holes. Yellow-bellied sapsuckers are unique in that they are the only species of woodpecker that is truly migratory. They are here with us in the spring, summer and early fall and head south as far a Central America, Texas and the Bahamas in the late fall and winter. In addition, yellow-bellied sapsuckers are the only species of woodpecker that uses live trees for feeding. Yellow-bellied sapsuckers are classified as migratory non-game birds and are protected by the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act; it is against the law to kill or harm them.

Linda K. Lillie has been President of Sprigs & Twigs, Inc. for the last 22 years. She is a graduate of Connecticut College in Botany, an accredited NOFA Organic Land Care Professional, a Connecticut Master Gardener and a national award winning landscape designer for her design and installation projects.

Sprigs & Twigs is scheduling appointments for Garden Design, Landscape Maintenance, Tree Care Services, Custom Stonework and Custom Carpentry Services. Visit our web site for details. Call us anytime to discuss your landscape needs and to meet with our staff.

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