Have you recently noticed new holes in your tree and are not sure what caused them? Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers could be responsible. As their name suggests, this woodpecker species relies on tree sap as their primary food source and they usually start “drilling” trees for sap in early spring.

Homeowners often contact the Extension Service this time of year worried that they are experiencing an insect infestation of some sort in their trees. Thankfully, they need not be alarmed and take a closer look at the holes in their tree. Sapsuckers will drill small, circular holes in a near-perfect line to extract as much sap from the tree as possible. Sometimes these systems of holes will wrap around the whole trunk of the tree. Once the tree has entirely leafed out, sapsuckers create shallower, rectangular holes to catch the sap traveling down from the leaves. These holes still maintain that neatly organized signature. Insects on the other hand are not as obsessively neat and organized when chewing into the tree bark, so their holes are more randomly scattered on the tree. Sapsuckers are attracted to old tree wounds, either the holes previously drilled by sapsuckers or other types of injuries, and may often return to the same tree each season. Holes drilled by the sapsucker are not typically harmful to the tree but can be if they are extensive enough and especially if they girdle the tree.

Most landowners will just let the birds be, but others may want to control the damage. You may not use lethal control of any kind for this bird, including poison, trapping, shooting, etc. The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, in addition to all other woodpecker species, are included and classified under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and are protected by state and federal law. You can, however, use exclusion methods or repellents to deter reoccurring damage. One example of exclusion is wrapping areas of the damaged tree with burlap or a similar-type material and removing it once the feeding period has ended. You may also install frightening devices, either visual or audio, such as metal pans, fake owls, etc., which will scare sapsuckers away. Be mindful, with any wildlife control method, especially while using frightening devices, the animal may become accustomed to the action over time. To combat this, try switching up the frightening method every couple of weeks.

Resources:
https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Yellow-bellied_Sapsucker/lifehistory

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https://www.clemson.edu/extension/forestry/newsletter/newsletter_files/2021-spring-forestry-newsletter