U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge

Red-cockaded Woodpeckers

Okefenokee NWR has approximately 73 red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) clusters (a group of trees used by a family group). Of these, 36 are active. Clusters occur in forested uplands surrounding the swamp and on interior islands within the swamp itself. There are 12 active and 16 inactive perimeter clusters, and 24 active and 21 inactive clusters on the interior islands. There are another 15 recruitment clusters within the upland forestry compartments that are available for dispersing RCW's to move into. Okefenokee NWR's recovery goal is 86 clusters based on total pine acres within identified use areas. The focus of management is on areas able to support a self-sustaining population of RCW's.

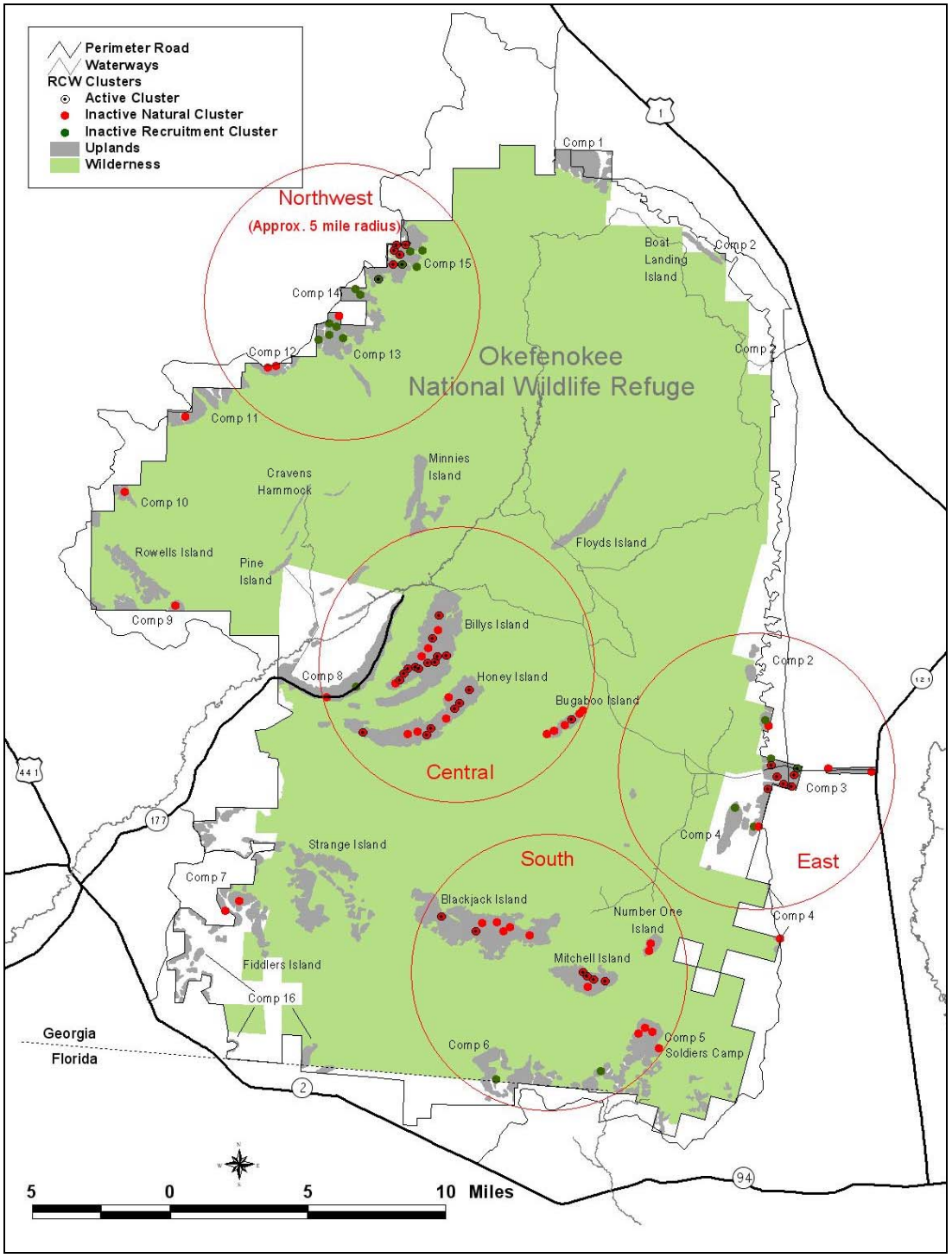
Okefenokee NWR RCW clusters are most likely the remains of a much larger population that once occurred in the pine stands surrounding the refuge that are now in private ownership. The refuge clusters were probably on the outer edges of the population. As timber was cut, these outer fringes were the habitat that remained and attracted RCW's that were being displaced. Although the refuge currently consists of 24,413 acres of suitable RCW habitat, this acreage is not contiguous. The upland forestry compartments that are intensively managed with fire and silvicultural practices comprise 12,444 acres. An additional 11,969 acres is dispersed over 11 interior islands. The clusters are very isolated due to fragmentation of the habitat. The mature stands of pine preferred by the birds are separated both by natural swamp vegetation and by private industrial lands. This makes it difficult for groups of RCW's to interact regularly and to replace lost or dispersing family members. Four populations have been identified within the refuge and different management strategies have been developed for each.

Sixty-seven percent of Okefenokee's RCW groups live on the upland islands in the interior of the swamp, most accessible only by helicopter. These islands are also within the Okefenokee Wilderness Area. Following Wilderness philosophy, "where the earth and its communities are untrammeled by man", artificial nest boxes and silvicultural practices are not used in the management of these islands. Fire is the only management tool used to manage habitat on these remote islands. Banding of RCW is not currently conducted on these interior islands due to logistical difficulties. Monitoring the islands for RCW activity during breeding season and checking cavities for suitability allows the refuge staff to determine the status of the populations, reproductive success, and potential limiting factors.

Refuge land on the perimeter of the swamp is more intensively managed to preserve and promote the native longleaf pine communities. This management has led to excellent habitat conditions with no mid-story problems, good composition of understory species, and an increasing longleaf pine component. RCW adults and nestlings are banded to monitor group size, composition, and dispersal. Artificial cavities (inserts) are installed where cavities are limited, ensuring that each cluster has at least four suitable cavities. Recruitment areas have also been provisioned with artificial cavities in hopes of attracting dispersing birds.

Because of the decrease in the number of active clusters in the Northwest Population of the refuge, two pairs of RCW were relocated to the area from Apalachicola National Forest in 1998. Five additional pairs were relocated to the area from Fort Stewart in 1999 and 2000. Of the fourteen birds relocated to the area, six are still present. To further expand the northwest population, 3 more pairs of RCW's were relocated from Fort Stewart to an upland forestry compartment approximately 3 miles from the exiting groups

during November 2004. Further expansion by dispersing juveniles will be encouraged by establishment of additional recruitment areas. Management goals are focused on optimizing habitat for the RCW while restoring and maintaining the longleaf-wiregrass ecosystem for all wildlife species native to this area. Additionally, forest management agreements with surrounding landowners will be pursued to increase the amount of suitable habitat between upland forestry compartments.



Map of Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge Red-cockaded Woodpecker populations. Clusters and cluster status are indicated by colored dots.