



Red-cockaded woodpecker

Picoides borealis

In the world of North American woodpeckers, little red-cockaded woodpeckers stand out as an exception to the usual rules in many ways. They are the only woodpeckers to excavate nest and roost sites in living trees. Unlike other woodpeckers, red-cockaded woodpeckers are a social species, living in small family groups. These groups chatter and call throughout the day, and red-cockaded woodpeckers seem to have a greater variety of vocalizations than other woodpeckers. Although hairy, downy and red-bellied woodpeckers frequently visit suet feeders, red-cockaded woodpeckers rarely do. And they are one of only two woodpecker species protected by the Endangered Species Act. The other protected woodpecker, the ivory-billed, for decades was assumed extinct until sightings on a national wildlife refuge in the Southeast. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with states and others to keep red-cockaded woodpeckers from sliding that close to extinction.

It's all about the habitat

Red-cockaded woodpeckers live in mature pine forests. Habitat alteration and fragmentation are the chief threats to their survival. Resources available for wildlife change dramatically when contiguous wildlife habitat is broken into small, isolated fragments. Fragmentation can alter wildlife's ability to disperse, decrease genetic diversity and undermine the integrity of the ecosystem. Southern pine savannahs and open woodlands once dominated the southeastern United States and may have totaled more than 200 million acres at the time of European colonization. The longleaf pine communities populated by red-cockaded woodpeckers likely covered 60 to 92 million of those acres. Today, fewer than 3 million acres remain, and only 3 percent of that is in relatively natural condition. The shortleaf pine that

was prevalent on dry slopes and ridges in the highlands of the interior has also declined considerably. With the decline of the forests, red-cockaded woodpeckers have disappeared from much of their range, which at one time extended from Florida to New Jersey and Maryland, as far west as Texas and Oklahoma, and inland to Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee. About 1 percent of that original range remains, and the birds no longer live in New Jersey, Maryland, Tennessee, Missouri and Kentucky.

Home is where the trees are

About the size of cardinals, these woodpeckers excavate cavities exclusively in living pine trees, preferring older pines infected with the fungal red heart disease that softens heartwood. It generally takes red-cockaded woodpeckers from one to three years to excavate the cavities they use for nesting and roosting. The birds are faithful to their cavity trees, and each member of the group has its own roost cavity. The aggregate of cavity trees occupied by a group is called a cluster, and may include one to 20 or more cavity trees on 3 to 60 acres. Red-cockaded woodpeckers peck holes around actively used cavities. These small wells exude resin that coats much of the tree. The birds keep the resin flowing as a defense against rat snakes and other predators.



John and Karen Hollingsworth

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Raising the roost

Red-cockaded woodpeckers live in groups with a breeding female and male plus zero to four helpers, usually male offspring from the previous year. Juvenile females generally leave the group before the breeding season to join a solitary male group and form a new breeding pair. Breeding pairs are monogamous and raise a single brood each year. The female

Red-cockaded woodpeckers rarely come to the ground. They even bathe in water-filled depressions on tree limbs. Recent research notes that female red-cockaded woodpeckers search for bone bits on the forest floor and stuff them in tree crevices. Zoologists say it is the first known instance of a bird hoarding something for its mineral, rather than caloric, content. Calcium-rich bone is not rare, but the birds probably seek it to ensure stronger eggshells. They stash it in a tree so they won't have to eat on the ground where they are vulnerable to predators.

lays three to four eggs in the male's roost cavity. Both parents and the helpers incubate the eggs and bring food to the young hatchlings. Chicks are fed ants, spiders, centipedes, wood roaches and other insects that also make up the bulk of adult red-cockaded woodpeckers' diet.

Build it and they will come

Developing artificial cavities and relocating birds has helped the recovery effort. In 10 years, red-cockaded woodpecker groups have increased nearly 30 percent to about 6,000. Artificial cavity construction has enhanced existing cavity tree clusters and established new groups. Moving isolated woodpeckers to these new habitats has reduced their likelihood of extinction and increased genetic diversity in the populations. Still, even at the current rate of growth, it will take at least another 70 years before red-cockaded woodpeckers will have recovered sufficiently to be removed from Endangered Species Act protection.

Hundreds of years of extensive logging of the southern pine forests, suppression of fire in the landscape, change in forest species and recent forestry practices such as clearcutting and short rotation of tree harvest have all been detrimental to red-cockaded woodpeckers. The Service's recovery efforts and habitat conservation plans are enhancing public and private lands that once again can support the red-cockaded woodpecker.



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