

## Red-Cockaded Woodpecker

*(Picoides borealis)*

The Red-Cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) is listed as an **Endangered** species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and a **Species of Special Concern** by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FFWCC). The red-cockaded woodpecker was listed due to the loss of mature pine forests to intensive silviculture and the fragmentation of available habitat by human population expansion. **It is illegal to harass, harm, capture, or kill this bird.**



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## Description

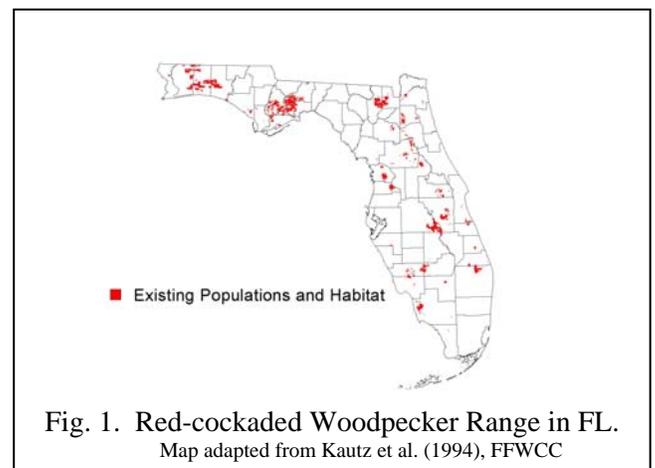
Red-cockaded woodpeckers:

- Are a little over seven inches long with a wingspan of approximately 14 inches. Males are slightly larger than females.
- Have distinctive markings that consist of white and black barring on the wings and back and have white cheek patches with a black head and neck.
- Are named for the red patch of feathers above and behind the eye of adult males; however, this patch is rarely visible. Immature males have a patch of red on their crown, otherwise male and female RCWs are very similar in appearance.

## Range

The Red-cockaded woodpecker's range was continuous from eastern Texas, through the southeast up to Tennessee and Kentucky and northeast as far as New Jersey. Today, isolated RCW colonies can be found through most of the historic range.

In Florida, RCWs were reported in great abundance early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were found in every county. Similar to what has occurred throughout its entire range, Florida's current distribution of RCWs is widespread but very fragmented (Fig. 1.)



Most RCW populations are established on Federal or State owned land where suitable habitat has been conserved and actively managed with RCWs in mind.

## Habitat

The RCW is closely associated with fire adapted southern pine ecosystems. Red-cockaded woodpeckers are unique among North American woodpeckers in that they create nest or roost cavities in living trees. The average age of cavity trees is greater than 60 years, but younger trees are often used. Old pines, especially longleaf, can be infected by a red-heart fungus which softens heartwood and causes easier cavity excavation. For this reason, longleaf pine tends to be preferred over other pines.

High quality nesting and roosting sites consist of old growth pine with an open understory maintained by frequent fire. Once the hardwood understory becomes too dense, understory tree height exceeds 15 feet or approaches

cavity height, or suitable replacement cavity trees are unavailable, RCW use of a stand will diminish and eventually end.

Red-cockaded woodpeckers primarily feed on insects found beneath bark in general and pine bark in particular. Pines as small as 10 inches in DBH provide foraging habitat for RCWs, but the best foraging sites consist of pines greater than 30 years old.

Red-cockaded woodpeckers form social groups or clans that consist of a breeding pair and younger, related “helpers”. The helpers help incubate eggs, provide food and raise offspring of the breeding pair. Breeders and helpers use separate cavities and a group of cavities is called a cavity cluster.

This dependence on old growth pine forests to provide food and shelter together with their specialized social structure make RCWs particularly vulnerable to loss of old growth pine forests and habitat fragmentation.

## Management and Protection

Farmers and landowners can be directly involved in the protection of this species by following these recommendations and precautions:

- Voluntary safe harbor agreements with the USFWS can be established to maintain or enhance existing RCW habitat or enhance adjacent habitat for RCW expansion with assurances that no additional land use restrictions will be levied against a landowner even if a RCW population grows and/or expands.
- Harvest of pine within known RCW colonies and associated foraging habitat should allow for future RCW cavity and forage needs.
- Old growth pine stands and foraging habitat used by RCWs should be prescribed burned every 2 to 5 years. Cavity trees must be protected from ignition by mechanical reduction (e.g., mowing, etc.) of fuel within a 30 foot radius around its trunk. Pine stands should be protected from crown scorch by use of proper prescribed fire burn techniques.
- Prescribed burning should be conducted carefully or even avoided if there are high fuel loads during the RCW breeding season (i.e., mid-April to mid-June).
- Where prescribed burning is not an option, mechanical, herbicidal or biological (i.e., grazing) methods of

hardwood control can be used.

- The height of understory hardwoods should never be allowed to approach the lowest cavity in a cavity cluster.
- Red-cockaded woodpeckers readily use cavity nest inserts where suitable foraging habitat exists and cavity trees are lacking or limited. Nest inserts should be installed with a southwest exposure, at a minimum height of 15 feet and in trees with a minimum DBH of 15 inches at the insert location.
- Cavity dependent wildlife that compete with the RCW can be controlled or mitigated using cavity restrictor plates and using artificial nest boxes, respectively. Plastic predator guards can be installed to deter nest predators.
- Dense stands of pines near known RCW populations can be thinned to no less than 50 ft<sup>2</sup> of basal area to increase diameter growth and dollar value of remaining trees and at the same time enhancing foraging habitat for RCWs.

The NRCS works with the USFWS and FFWCC to ensure that Federal and State-listed species will not be adversely affected by actions planned by landowners. If you do not contact NRCS, please remember that the Red-Cockaded Woodpecker is a protected species and, as a minimum, the USFWS and the FFWCC should review your proposed actions. They can be contacted at the following offices:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service/ Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (addresses to be inserted below by District Conservationist):

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