



RECOVERY EFFORTS SHOW PROMISE FOR THE ENDANGERED RED-COCKADED WOODPECKER

BY HAZEL FREEMAN

On a quiet May morning, a small group of amateur birders stand amid the tall pine trees in the heart of Florida's Apalachicola National Forest (ANF). Alan Knothe, an education and training expert with the Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve (Alan is no longer with the ANERR) has led his small group of eager birders deep into the trees. Standing silently, we look, listen, and hope for a glimpse of a rare bird...the red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW).

Sprawling across about six hundred thousand acres in the Florida panhandle, the ANF is the largest national forest in Florida. Located southwest of Tallahassee, the ANF was established

WOODPECKER

Continued on page 4

WOODPECKER

Continued from page 1

in 1936, and began its life as a depleted and abused piece of Mother Earth. Detrimental timber and turpentine producing practices rendered the land in poor shape. But the earth is a great healer if given a chance, and once designated a national forest, the ANF began its recovery. The ANF is now a vibrant, healthy, productive forest that boasts the largest population in the world of the red-cockaded woodpecker.

With his trained birding eyes and ears, Alan hears the call, and spots a quick flash of movement through the tall pines. "There's one," he says quietly, as he points towards the top of a tree. We crane our necks, shield our eyes from the sun, and search the mottled tree trunks for the elusive woodpecker. Unlike the pileated and the red-headed woodpecker, the red-cockaded is smaller, and much less dramatic in its appearance. Without a discerning birder's eye you might easily mistake the red-cockaded for the much more common downy woodpecker.

Once numbering in the millions, and common in Florida's vast acres of mature pine forests, the red-cockaded numbers had dwindled to around ten thousand individuals. By the time it was federally listed as an endangered species in 1970, the bird was moving quickly towards extinction. It is the only other woodpecker, besides the famed ivory-billed, to be protected under the Endangered Species Act. The woodpecker's prime habitat, the longleaf pine ecosystem, once covering some ninety million acres in Florida, has been reduced to about 3% of its former acreage, making it one of the most endangered ecosystems in North America.

Similar to the spotted owl in the northwest, this inconspicuous woodpecker relies on mature forest for its habitat. With the red-cockaded woodpeckers' numbers dependent on this mature forest habitat, it becomes an effective indicator as to whether the longleaf pine ecosystem is healthy. To satisfy the needs of the woodpeckers, a mature pine forest must have trees ranging in age from about eighty to one-hundred twenty years, or older, a rare occurrence in today's world. In



A red-cockaded hole with the pine resin coating the tree

addition to the spread of development and agriculture, Florida's commercial pine forests are harvested when trees are between twenty and forty years old, leaving little hope that trees will be allowed to mature enough to support woodpecker populations.

At only seven to eight inches in length, the red-cockaded woodpecker is on the smaller end of the woodpecker scale and only slightly larger than a bluebird. The red cockades on the heads of the male birds are usually not visible unless he is excited or upset. Large white cheek patches are one of the distinguishing features to look for when spotting the bird, along with the black and white bars on the back.

While you can find many species of woodpeckers in pine forests, the red-cockaded has some unusual characteristics that separate it from other woodpeckers. It is the only woodpecker that excavates roosting and nesting cavities in the living part of the pine tree. In an effort to protect the nest cavities from one of their main predators, rat snakes, that can easily maneuver up tree trunks, the woodpeckers drill small holes around the nest opening called resin wells. Once drilled, the small

holes ooze the sticky, flowing pine resin that runs down the trunk, which coats the tree, and discourages intruders.

"Looking for this waxy build up on the trees around an entrance hole is one way to spot active nest cavities," says Alan. As we walked through the tall pines he pointed out trees with cavities and the long trails of sticky ooze that surround each opening. Once you know what you're looking for, the holes are fairly easy to spot.

While other woodpeckers sometimes compete with the red-cockaded for ownership of active cavities, abandoned cavities provide important shelter for many other animals such as bluebirds, other woodpeckers and birds, honeybees, and flying squirrels. Pileated woodpeckers can easily ruin a red-cockaded cavity by enlarging the opening, which causes the smaller woodpeckers to abandon the cavity. Once enlarged, larger woodpeckers, raccoons, small owls, or wood ducks might use the cavity.

The other unusual characteristic these woodpeckers exhibit is their advanced social system, living in groups that can number from just two, to as many as nine or more birds. The colony consists of a cluster of trees where a number of cavities have been excavated for the groups use for nesting as well as roosting. Each woodpecker roosts in its own cavity, if enough cavities are available. If not, some birds may roost out in the open until its cavity is finished.

Only one breeding pair heads up the social hierarchy while young birds and

WOODPECKER

Continued on page 5

WOODPECKER

Continued from page 4

adult males from previous years remain with the group as helpers. Juvenile females usually disperse in search of mates in a new nesting area. Nesting begins in late April when a clutch of two to five eggs is laid. The non-breeding family members may help incubate the eggs for ten to twelve days, as well as feed the young once they're hatched. After the young birds fledge, work continues on excavating cavities under construction.

Woodpeckers spend years working on cavity trees. The birds need trees mature enough that the size of the center heartwood, once excavated, allows for a cavity large enough for the bird, but remains free of any sap or resin. The birds prefer trees affected by the red heart fungus, a fungus that softens the heartwood, making it easier for the woodpeckers to excavate their cavities. Once excavated, these clusters of cavities may be used by generation after generation of birds.

Some recovery efforts of the Apalachicola National Forest include timber thinning to open up the forest, installing artificial cavities, and the translocation of juvenile woodpeckers to other areas," says Fitzgerald. "We've been the primary donor of juvenile birds and have given them to many other private and public lands involved in the recovery project. Our relocated birds have rescued many smaller populations of birds in other areas. We move about forty birds a year," adds Fitzgerald.



A long leaf pine forest in Apalachicola National Forest, Florida (ANF)

The other big advance in the recovery program has been the development and placement of artificial cavities in clusters to encourage new populations of birds. A similar effort was used in the 1940s to provide nesting boxes for wood ducks. That effort has been a great success and is still in practice today. If trees in favorable habitat are large enough, artificial holes can be drilled into trees. If trees aren't quite big enough to drill artificial cavities, boxes (called inserts) are installed in trees. Both methods provide immediate nesting and roosting cavities that woodpeckers can use.

"We're happy to say that today Apalachicola National Forest is home to about 650 clusters of woodpeckers and about 1,200 birds," says Fitzgerald. Total numbers for birds across eleven states is estimated at around 14,000 birds in 5,600 active clusters. Although population numbers are slowly creeping up, experts indicate that there are small groups of woodpeckers still in danger of disappearing and the recovery is a very slow process. It will take decades for the woodpecker's numbers to increase to a point where they may no longer be considered endangered. I'm hopeful that day will come.

Standing amid the tall pines hearing the red-cockaded call, watching as the small, inconspicuous little woodpecker flits through the trees, I think about how close it came to completely disappearing. The red-cockaded and the long leaf pine ecosystem, like so many other species/habitat balancing acts, are tightly entwined; if one disappears so goes the other. Some might wonder if all the effort is worth it. In my mind, mankind and nature are all one big tapestry. When one thread begins to unravel, it's only a matter of time before it all unravels.

Hazel Freeman is a freelance writer from Ohio. With a life-long love of nature and the out-of-doors her writing reflects her deep passion, respect, and concern for the natural world in which we live.

For more info on **Apalachicola National Forest** visit:

<http://www.stateparks.com/apalachicola.html>

