



The Red-cockaded Woodpecker is identified by its black cap and large white cheek patch



Oozing sap makes the RCW's cavity tree resemble a candle

Brunswick Wildlife Longleaf Pine Specialist

“Too picky” might work when describing a stern college professor, parent, or ex-girl friend. You can just ignore them or run for cover, absolving yourself of any wrongdoing on your part. However, when “too picky” applies to an animal with very specialized needs, in this case a woodpecker, it is not that easy. It cannot help itself so we must.

Red-cockaded Woodpeckers (RCW's) are year-round residents of mature pine forests of the southeast. They are strong habitat specialists, requiring large territories averaging 200 acres but ranging upward to 500 acres. High quality habitat typically consists of open forests of longleaf pine.

Unfortunately, only about one percent of this habitat that once stretched from New Jersey to Eastern Oklahoma remains today. Once considered common, the RCW has been designated as an endangered species since 1970.

The stronger the specialization, the more vulnerable a species is to extinction. With the virtual elimination most old-growth pines in the southeast, this species has been totally extirpated from several states and its numbers are still declining in other states.

Longleaf ecosystems feature pine savannas that are ecological communities comprised of scattered trees and large, open areas of grasses and forbs. In some cases the savannas are wet during the wet part of the year and sometimes savannas are xeric sandhills communities.

For hundreds of thousands of years, summer fires occurring regularly on a one to five year basis, have played an important role. Fire aides those species that adapted to it. Fire-

tolerant longleaf pines require fire for seed germination and the cleared floor allows wiregrass to sprout and flourish. Fire maintains the open forest needed by RCW's and a host of other pine savanna birds by killing hardwoods in the understory.

Modern fire suppression practices, however, lead to mid-story growth which chokes out wiregrass ground cover and fills in the open space RCW's need.

RCW's and woodpeckers in general are keystone species of their ecosystem. Abandoned RCW trees offer cavities for other inhabitants like chickadees, titmice, and Downy, Hairy, and Red-bellied Woodpeckers. Other species of woodpeckers will sometimes enlarge the abandoned hole large enough to accommodate screech owls, wood ducks, fox squirrels, and other mammals. Also, standing in line for the next available cavity are a few species of reptiles and amphibians and insects like bees and wasps.

The RCW is similar in size to the common Downy and uncommon Hairy Woodpeckers that may forage at your feeders. The RCW, however, has a "ladder back" instead of a white back. The large white cheek patch, ringed by its black cap and nape differentiates the RCW. A small, red cockade on the side of the male's cap is rarely visible except during breeding and while defending territory.

RCW's live in extended family groups in a cluster of cavity trees. Each bird maintains its own cavity in the cluster. The family group consists of a breeding pair plus non-breeding helpers who assist with incubation, feeding of nestlings and fledglings, territory and cavity defense, and cavity excavation.

Usually there are between one and four helpers, typically young males from the previous year's brood. Juvenile females serve as helpers on rare occasions; however, they usually disperse prior to the following breeding season looking for groups with an un-paired male.

In our area, RCW's excavate nest and roost cavities in live longleaf pines that are about 100 years old. Cavity excavation occurs where red heart fungus, found in older trees, has attacked the tree and softened the inner heartwood making it easier to excavate.

Around each cavity RCW's also excavate resin wells that are kept flowing by daily maintenance. Sap from resin wells coats the tree giving it a candle-like appearance as shown in the photo. Turpentine flowing from the wells protects the birds, eggs, and nestlings from rat snakes that are accomplished climbers and other predators.

The group's nest is in the roost cavity of the breeding male. It is usually the cluster's newest cavity and therefore it has the most sap flowing.

In addition to being called "candle trees", cavity trees are called "flattops" or just plain "ugly". Current refuges have been cut one or more times; however, the ugly trees were left because they were not marketable. By default they are the oldest trees remaining and perfect for RCW's.

The era of turpentine harvesting for the naval stores industry ended in the 1930's; however, some cavity trees in Boiling Spring Lakes still have "chevron" slashes, signifying the tree's age and status as a good sap producer. On that both man and bird agreed.

The species continues to decline due to human activity. The threat of logging has lessened; however, new threats including development and forest fragmentation are taking their toll. Total fire suppression, without management by prescribed burns, remains a problem because it reduces suitable open habitat even if trees are available.

The remaining populations are fragmented into isolated populations and there are approximately thirty populations with most of the birds occurring in only six. The total population level is currently estimated to be around 4,500 groups with 9,000 to 11,000 birds.

The Sandhills area, including Fort Bragg and Weymouth Woods State Park, is home to one of the largest populations, estimated at 280 pairs. Eglin AFB Florida hosts an estimated 300 pairs. Local populations are also found in Croatan National Forest, Camp Lejeune, Holly Shelter, and Boiling Spring Lakes. Boiling Spring Lakes hosts twenty-two clusters

Recovery efforts are daunting considering it takes longleaf pines 100 to 150 years to grow to full size plus fragmentation that limits the large territory needed for foraging, the long period it takes for excavating cavities, and aggressive fire suppression.

Cavity competition is a major concern for those trying to assist RCW's. Sometimes flying squirrels and other mammals or larger woodpeckers do not wait until an RCW cavity is abandoned before moving in. Once a larger woodpecker enlarges the cavity entrance, it is unsuitable for the RCW.

Recovery plans therefore include managing longleaf ecosystems using prescribed burns and other methods; minimizing cavity competition with other species; and monitor population and nesting activities.

Given the long excavation time and to make up for "home invasions" artificial cavities created with embedded nest boxes are used. Also, female juvenile translocation from larger, more stable populations to smaller ones is used to mitigate fragmentation.

John Ennis