

Red-cockaded Woodpecker

RCW092507

IDENTIFICATION: The red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) is a small (7 - 8 inches) black and white woodpecker with no visible red. It is distinguished from other black and white woodpeckers by its large white cheek patch and zebra striped or ladder back. Other small Alabama woodpeckers have either an unstriped white back, a black eye-stripe or red on the head. The RCW is the only Alabama woodpecker that inhabits living pine trees, drilling a hole approximately 3 inches in diameter through the sapwood and into the heart of the tree. They also peck out resin wells, half-dollar sized wounds which bleed resin onto the tree trunk. The resin encrusted tree stem is often easier to identify than the bird. It resembles a large wax candle, easily seen in open woods the bird inhabits.



The resin on active trees is clear or amber in color. On inactive trees, it appears gray or has an “icing” appearance. Other woodpeckers and some animals use abandoned RCW dens, but often enlarge the entrance. RCW live in small groups in a one to ten acre area called a cluster or colony. They pry off loose bark and feed on mites, insects, and larvae underneath, rather than drilling into dead wood like other woodpeckers.

FORESTRY CONSIDERATIONS: Since RCW require large, old (at least 65 years) pines to nest in, they don't occur in many places. When an RCW tree is suspected, an experienced biologist should determine if the site is active. Leave den trees and surrounding areas intact until determination is made. Biologists believe that foraging stands of fairly large pines are necessary for successful management for the woodpecker. Logging or other activity near the den trees during the breeding or brood rearing season may disturb them enough to cause them to abandon the site or to be unsuccessful in raising the young. Contact the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service or the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources with questions concerning the detection and protection of RCW.

DISTRIBUTION BY COUNTY: RCW can occur anywhere in the state where there is old pine timber in open stands. Counties where they are known to occur include Baldwin, Bibb, Calhoun, Chilton, Clay, Cleburne, Conecuh, Coosa, Covington, Dallas, Escambia, Geneva, Hale, Lawrence, Macon, Marshall, Perry, Pickens, Russell, Talladega, Tallapoosa, Tuscaloosa and Winston.

MANAGEMENT: Management for red-cockaded woodpeckers involves more of an ecosystem approach. Restoration of good quality habitat through an intensive burning program and silviculture practices is critical for red-cockaded woodpeckers. Old-growth pine stands with a low basal area (45-75 square feet per acre) and little to no midstory is essential habitat. Midstory components (particularly hardwoods) should be removed initially with hand tools (chainsaws and brushhooks) to minimize the impact on native vegetation. Once these components have been removed, the reintroduction of

frequent fire becomes critical in creating and maintaining suitable habitat. Fire should be used in a manner as to mimic the historical accounts of fire in red-cockaded woodpecker habitat. This would include both cool season and growing season burns. Creating and maintaining a habitat with a park-like appearance in both nesting and foraging areas is essential in the management of red-cockaded woodpeckers.

Two management practices that have proven successful on federal lands have been the use of artificial cavities and population augmentation. Artificial cavities have been successful by creating nesting and roosting opportunities in otherwise unsuitable habitat. This has proven critical in the survival of small populations where suitable nesting habitat has been lacking. Translocation of juvenile birds from one population to another has also proven to aid in the survival of small populations. The translocation of birds allows for increased genetic diversity in these small populations and for the introduction of birds into expanded suitable habitat. Although these two management strategies have proven successful, they are only successful where good quality habitat exists.

Photo and Text Credit: Threatened and Endangered Species of Alabama: A Guide to Assist with Forestry Activities, Second Edition, USFS



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