

Red-cockaded Woodpecker: Habitat in Peril

Southwest Region—Texas

Red-cockaded Woodpecker: Habitat in Peril

Loss of habitat is often cited as the reason for species' decline. The endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker nests in open stands of Longleaf and other southern pines. The bird prefers mature trees, 80 years and older. Fire suppression has changed the landscape and encouraged the growth of hardwoods. The Service and its partners have coalesced to help reverse the Red-cockaded Woodpecker's declining habitat and recover the rare bird.

On January 16, 2008, the Coordinator for the Implementation Team for Strategic Habitat Conservation (ITSHC) took part in a field trip to the Cook's Branch Conservancy Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) Habitat Management Area north of Houston. The owner of this private land is engaged in partnerships with state and federal agencies to provide habitat for the endangered RCW, as well as, bobwhite, eastern wild turkey and bald eagle. All of these are species dependent upon well managed pine forests in East Texas. The landowner is committed to successful management of these species.

Strategic Habitat Conservation (SHC) will improve the conservation of populations and the ecological functions that sustain them. SHC is a framework of four functional elements that must occur in an adaptive management loop. The four elements are:

1. *Biological Planning*
identify priority species and establish species population objectives, identify limiting factors;



Typical high-quality red-cockaded habitat, Cook's Branch Conservancy
Photograph by Jeffrey A. Reid

2. *Conservation Design*
develop habitat objectives for desired landscape conditions;
3. *Conservation Delivery*
implement on-the-ground conservation actions;
4. *Monitoring and Research*
monitor and evaluate conservation delivery.

The RCW is the only species of woodpecker to excavate roost and nest cavities in mature live pine trees. Artificial cavities may be created to provide additional habitat. The RCW requires an "open" pine forest with a grassy herbaceous understory maintained by fire. When these open pine forests do not burn, they develop a woody understory and midstory which makes it harder for the birds to find food. This usually results in the abandonment of these areas.

Management activities on RCW habitat on Cook's Branch include thinning pine trees, mulching and spraying the hardwood midstory, prescribed burning, and establishment of artificial cavities that support the Primary Core Recovery population in the Upper West Gulf Coast Plain of eastern Texas.

The habitat management actions are being supported by the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program of the Fish and Wildlife Service. This program provides technical and cost assistance to private landowners to benefit species such as those that occur on Cook's Branch.

Management planning on Cook's Branch has three phases: 1.) habitat improvement and cavity placement in active clusters to stabilize the established RCW population; 2.) enrollment in the *Regional Habitat Conservation Plan for the RCW on Private Lands in the East Texas Pineywoods*; and, 3.) the restoration and enhancement of additional habitat to increase the RCW population. In 2007, there were 18 RCW family groups on the property. The long-term forest management goal is to restore a forest structure and ecology that is representative of pre-settlement conditions. This planning illustrates *Conservation Design*, the second element of SHC.



Red-cockaded woodpecker
Photograph by John and Karen Hollingsworth

The RCW cavities are checked each spring. Management actions are continuously monitored and future treatments, such as prescribed burning and thinning, are based upon the response of the habitat and the RCWs to prior actions. This a good example of the *Monitoring and Research* element of SHC.

The field trip was organized by Ron Jones (Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program) in the Ecological Services Clear Lake Field Office, Texas.

For Further RCW Information

Jeffrey A. Reid
East Texas Sub-Office
Texas Ecological Services Field
Office, Arlington, Texas
936/639-8546
Jeffrey_Reid@fws.gov

For Further SHC Information

Brian Hanson
Co-chairman of the ITSHC
505/248-6649
Brian_Hanson@fws.gov
www.fws.gov/southwest/
About%20Us/shc.html

January 2008

