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Red-cockaded woodpecker making comeback at Piney Grove

By Andy Thompson | Richmond Times-Dispatch

Beneath a tall loblolly pine, Mike Wilson spreads a blanket on the forest floor. Bryan Watts, his colleague at the Center for Conservation Biology, descends the tree with a small canvas bag, which he hands to Wilson. A crowd gathers in anticipation, cameras ready.

With a smile born of the miraculous nature of what he's about to share, Wilson reaches into the bag and deposits a writhing jumble of pink flesh onto the blanket. Cameras whir and click. Oohs and aahs fill the air.

It's a tiny bird, five days old with no feathers, eyes closed — completely helpless. It fits in the palm of Wilson's hand. Any bird in this state would be a sight, but this isn't just any bird.

This is a red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW), a federally endangered species, the rarest avian resident of Virginia's woods and fields, and the subject of the May entry in my monthly series on the Commonwealth's rare flora, fauna and places.

Before this chick, and others like it, hatched a few days ago, the population for the entire state was 44 — all in this 3,200-acre preserve owned by The Nature Conservancy. And considering that in 2001 that number was 11 or 12, this vulnerable pink marvel represents a small triumph for the conservation groups who work to see it thrive and the hope that this success can be repeated in the future.

What makes RCWs such an interesting species is what has driven them to their precarious population state throughout the Southeast. They prefer to nest and forage in longleaf pine forests at least 60 years old where intermittent fire has opened the canopy and burned the understory, leaving grasses rather than hardwoods.

A thousand years ago, those conditions were common from New Jersey to Florida to Texas. But, explains Brian van Eerden, Southern Rivers Program Director for The Nature Conservancy, what once was 90 million acres of longleaf pines is down to just three percent of its historical range.

"In Virginia, we measure longleaf pines by the tree, not the acre," he says.

Piney Grove is in Sussex County, near Wakefield. Most of the trees are loblolly and shortleaf pines, which RCWs will nest in as well.

These birds evolved in this landscape where fire-resistant longleafs predominated in grassy savannas. When the trees reached a certain age and size, they often were infected with red heart disease, a fungus that affects the tree's heartwood. The birds took advantage of that weakened heartwood to excavate a nest. Unlike other woodpeckers, it doesn't nest in dead trees.

But it wasn't just nesting that became a problem as vast acres of longleafs fell to the saw.

"Studies have shown that the older trees harbor higher insect densities," Watts said.

In the winter, when food sources are scarce, the birds rely on older growth pines. They pick away the bark scales to find insects. Younger trees simply don't support enough insects for RCWs to survive.

Wilson explains that frequent burning is another key to the RCWs' continued ability to thrive: "There's something about the burning that opens up the ecosystem. It really helps with calcium cycles. Areas that aren't burned have lowered calcium in the soil."

That translates into plant health, then insect health and then bird health.

"There's a bunch of interlacing factors, but it all tells the story when you get to the end point."

On this day, that story is a very positive one. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages federal endangered species programs, has set a goal of 10 breeding pairs for this preserve. That's exactly how many are here.

"We're on the right track," said Bobby Clontz, a Land Steward for TNC. "We expect over the next couple of years to add one or two more clusters, and then we're going to be approaching the limits of our habitat."

TNC owns the land, but the success of Piney Grove has been a cooperative effort.

Groups like the Center for Conservation Biology, the USFWS, and the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries have all played a part.

At the heart of the effort, though, before all the resources are found and allocated to aid this fragile bird, there has to be an understanding of why this species and the world it inhabits is worth saving. When you see a five-day-old chick in the palm of a human hand, the answer is clear.

Van Eerden says it well: "These species just sort of get left behind because of their biology. Their life history just doesn't align with the way forests are managed. And I think humans say, 'There's something wrong about losing species, losing these features that are part of our natural history.'

"We've accomplished a population goal, but we've also restored some hope in our collective ability to restore this amazing ecosystem."

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