



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Red-cockaded Woodpecker

Oklahoma Ecological Service Field Office

Red-cockaded Woodpecker

Picoides borealis

Description

The red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) occurs in extensive mature open pine forest of the southeastern United States, maintained naturally by frequent (1–5 yr interval) lightning-started (or prescribed fire) during the summer. About the size of a cardinal, the RCW is black-and-white with a ladder back (back and wings are black with white horizontal bars) and large white auricular patches. Its white “cheeks” separate the RCW from all other species in its range. Black head and nape, and a narrow white line above the eye, white-gray-buff nasal tufts. Chest is white to gray-white and belly has distinctive black spots along the sides of breast leading to bars on flanks. Adult males have a small red patch or “cockade” above each cheek within the base of the black cap, but this is rarely visible in the wild. Tail is black with white outer rectrices with black bars. Legs and feet are gray and bill is black.

Distribution

Each clan needs about 200 acres of old pine forest to support its foraging and habitat needs. RCW cavity trees in Oklahoma usually are in loblolly pine 70 – 100 years old; in other parts of its range, RCW prefer longleaf pine 80 – 120 years old. The roosting chamber is in the heartwood of the tree which is very hard except when infected by heart rot fungus that weakens the heartwood. It is these weakened trees RCW seek out to create their cavities.

Life History

Live in groups of 2 – 6 birds (a clan) maintain year-round territories around their nesting and roost-trees. Cavities are made in live pine trees, each bird roosts in its own cavity. RCW peck holes around active cavities to keep resin flowing from the interior of the tree and sticky helping to defend against snakes

and other predators. Takes up to 3 years to excavate a cavity, they are faithful to their cavity tree. The group of cavity trees may include 1 – 20 or more trees on 3 – 60 acres, collectively referred to as a cluster. A group of nest and roost trees is called a colony and each colony is used by only one clan that has only one breeding female. RCW usually mate for life, but may change mates between years. Other birds in the clan are either offspring or male “helpers” that usually assist in incubating eggs, feeding young, making new cavities, and defending the clan’s territory. Nesting season (nesting initiation through fledging young) is during April through July. The female will lay 2 – 5 eggs in the male’s nest cavity. The young birds remain within the territory throughout the summer and early fall when the juvenile females disperse to form a new clan with a solitary male, while the juvenile males remain in the clan as helpers. RCW’s diet is mainly insects, spiders, centipedes and other wood-boring insects; about 15% of their diet is seasonal wild fruit.

Conservation

Federally-listed as endangered (35 CFR 8495; June 2, 1970). Critical habitat has not been designated. From the late 1800s to the mid 1900s, RCW declined rapidly as their mature pine forest habitat was altered, primarily from timber harvest and agriculture. Populations are now highly fragmented. Losses have occurred throughout the species’ range, including steady declines in recent decades on National Forests throughout the South, only about 1% of their original range remains. In Oklahoma, RCW remain in only one location; McCurtain County.

References

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1985. *Red-cockaded Woodpecker Recover Plan*. Atlanta, Georgia.



Red-cockaded woodpecker. USFWS

Jackson, Jerome A. 1994. *Red-cockaded Woodpecker (Picoides borealis)*, *The Birds of North America Online* (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online: <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/085> doi:10.2173/bna.85

For Further Information

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