DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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MYSTERIOUS WOODPECKER STUDIED

The mystery behind the behavior of the red-cockaded woodpecker, an endangered species, may be unraveled by a team of scientists who have been asked to develop a plan to save the bird from extinction. The team's establishment was announced today by Keith M. Schreiner, Associate Director of Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The recovery team will be headed by Jerome A. Jackson of Mississippi State University, and will include Wilson W. Baker of Tall Timbers Research Institute, Verlon Carter of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Thad Cherry of Weyerhauser Corporation, and Melvin L. Hopkins of the U.S. Forest Service. The team will also use consultants to develop and help implement a comprehensive plan to restore this bird to a healthy state and protect potential nesting habitat. The consultants are Ted Beckett of Magnolia Gardens, Daniel W. Lay of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Teddy E. Lynn, Jr., of International Paper Company, and Richard L. Thompson of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Although still inhabiting its original range in the Southeastern United States, the populations have declined in recent years due to forestry practices which have affected the park-like pine woods where the bird lives.

Modern forestry practices tend to eliminate the aging pine trees the bird requires for its nests and roosts. Unlike other woodpeckers, it makes its home only in mature, living pine trees infected with "red heart," a

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fungus disease which rots trees from the inside out. This condition seldom strikes trees less than 80 years old, and in today's managed forests few trees are permitted to become old enough to contract the disease.

How the woodpecker recognizes the diseased trees, which appear healthy from the outside, is only one of the unsolved mysteries in the life of this bird. Once the right tree has been located, the bird pecks through the living outer wood and hollows out a snug cavity in the softer heart of the tree. Both the male and female peck 12-inch deep cavities in separate trees. Nesting takes place in the cavity carved out by the male.

After the cavity is hollowed out, the birds undertake an even more unusual project--the drilling of many small holes into the sapwood surrounding the cavity. From these holes a continuous flow of sticky pitch oozes, eventually coating the trunk of the tree with a white sheen visible some distance away. The exact purpose of this sticky coating is still unknown, but it may help discourage ants, flying squirrels, or snakes from invading the nest. Or, it may help the bird locate its home tree.

Another unique feature of the bird's habits is its social nature. This small woodpecker tends to nest in colonies, and young birds living in adjacent trees sometime help pairs raise their young. These helpers may include the pair's own young from the previous year.

The red-cockaded woodpecker also plays an interesting role in the pine woods. These areas are frequently subject to wild fires which rapidly consume the dead trees in which other species of woodpeckers usually hollow out their nests. The living, pitch-coated homes of the red-cockaded woodpeckers, however, usually survive the fires unscathed. Vacant red-cockaded woodpecker nests are much in demand: red-bellied, red-headed, and pileated woodpeckers, titmice, bluebirds, and wood ducks, squirrels, and even honey bees may take them over, finding in a living tree a safe home which they cannot construct themselves.

Although the U.S. Forest Service, State, and private groups have for some time been preserving particular trees, the recovery team will further develop and coordinate new and existing efforts to save this bird.

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