



Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge **Red-cockaded Woodpeckers**



Okefenokee NWR has approximately 97 red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) clusters (a group of trees used by a family group). Of these, 46 are active. Clusters occur in forested uplands surrounding the swamp and on interior islands within the swamp itself. There are 29 active and 31 inactive perimeter clusters, and 17 active and 20 inactive clusters on the interior islands. Okefenokee NWR's recovery goal is 86 potential breeding groups based on total pine acres within identified use areas. The focus of management is on areas able to support a self-sustaining population of RCW's.

Okefenokee NWR RCW clusters are most likely the remains of a much larger population that once depended on the pine stands surrounding the refuge. Although the refuge currently consists of 24,413 acres of suitable RCW habitat, this acreage is not contiguous. The upland forestry compartments that are intensively managed with fire and silvicultural practices comprise 12,444 acres. An additional 11,969 acres is dispersed over 11 interior islands. The clusters are very isolated due to fragmentation of the habitat. The mature stands of pine preferred by the birds are separated both by natural swamp vegetation and by private industrial lands. This makes it difficult for groups of RCW's to interact regularly and to replace lost or dispersing family members. Four populations have been identified within the refuge and different management strategies have been developed for each.



Thirty-seven percent of Okefenokee's RCW groups live on the upland islands in the interior of the swamp, most accessible only by helicopter. These islands are also within the Okefenokee Wilderness Area. Following Wilderness philosophy, "where the earth and its communities are untrammelled by man", artificial nest boxes and silvicultural practices are not used in the management of these islands. Fire is the only management tool used to manage habitat on these remote islands. Banding of RCW is not currently conducted on these interior islands due to logistical difficulties. Monitoring the islands for RCW activity during breeding season and checking cavities for suitability allows the refuge staff to determine the status of the populations, reproductive success, and potential limiting factors.

Refuge land on the perimeter of the swamp is more intensively managed to preserve and promote the native longleaf pine communities. This management has led to excellent habitat conditions with no mid-story problems, good composition of understory species, and an increasing longleaf pine component. RCW adults and nestlings are banded to monitor group size, composition, and dispersal. Artificial cavities (inserts or drilled cavities) are installed where cavities are limited, ensuring that each cluster has at least four suitable cavities.

During 1998, we began releasing RCWs from other populations because of the decrease in the number of active clusters around the refuge perimeter. Between 1998 and 2013, 40 birds were translocated to the Okefenokee, of which 28 have remained in refuge populations.

Management goals are focused on optimizing habitat for the RCW while restoring and maintaining the longleaf-wiregrass ecosystem for all wildlife species native to this area. Additionally, forest management agreements with surrounding landowners will be pursued to increase the amount of suitable habitat between upland forestry compartments.



2016 Red-cockaded Woodpecker Clusters Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge

