
LANDOWNERS AND ENDANGERED SPECIES: “SAFE HARBOR” FOR BOTH!

Red-Cockaded Woodpecker

An Endangered Species

The red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) is a small bird endemic to the open, mature and old growth pine forests of the southeastern United States.



RCW bringing food to nest (Derrick Hamrick).

Due to loss of suitable habitat the red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) has experienced a drastic decline in numbers, which prompted its listing as endangered in 1970, entitling it to federal protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Its habitat has been reduced to about 3% of its former size due to intensive timber harvests, agriculture, development, and sustained fire suppression over the past two centuries. This has resulted in a decline in numbers of RCWs of approximately 99%. To encourage landowners to help protect and provide habitat for this endangered species, Alabama and other states have implemented a program called “Safe Harbor”. This brochure describes the major features of the program for potential participants.

The most distinguishing characteristics for the RCW are its overall black and white coloration, the large white cheek patch, and its “zebra” back with horizontal black and white stripes.

Two other similar woodpeckers, the hairy and the downy, could be confused with the RCW, but differ in having a black stripe on the cheek and a solid white stripe down the back. Male hairy and downy woodpeckers also have a red patch on the back of the head, whereas red is rarely seen on RCWs. In spite of its



Male RCW bringing food to nest. (Jim Hanula)



Male RCW nestling. (Derrick Hamrick)

name, the small red “cockade” of the male red-cockaded woodpecker is almost never visible, but is hidden by feathers of the black cap (although nestling males have a prominent red patch on the top of the head).

The nesting and foraging habitat of the RCW is also distinctive. It is the only North American woodpecker that creates nest cavities in living pine trees, especially longleaf pine but also loblolly, shortleaf, slash, and pond pine.



RCW cluster in longleaf pine forest (Bob Hooper).

Nesting and roosting cavities are excavated in mature pines large enough to have sufficient resin-free heartwood for the cavity to be sap-free. In contrast the flow of sap around the entrance hole is encouraged by removing the bark and by “resin wells” chipped through the bark. The resulting flow of sap around the entrance helps protect the nest from predators such as rat snakes, and also gives the RCW cavity a distinctive candle-like appearance.



RCW working resin wells (Derrick Hamrick).



RCW advanced start.
(Ralph Costa)



Active RCW cavity.
(Bob Hooper)

The birds do not migrate, but are territorial, living in groups of two to six birds, including a breeding pair and several male offspring from previous years, which help care for new eggs and young. Each group uses an area of mature pine forest 75-200 acres in size for feeding. Their foods consist mostly of insects and spiders, including beetles, ants, roaches, and other insects that occur in or on pine trees. The foraging area must be open, with scattered mature pines and little or no midstory vegetation.



High quality longleaf pine RCW foraging habitat (Felicia Sanders).

Landowner Concerns

The majority of all active RCW groups occur on public lands, but throughout the RCW range, an estimated 23% are located on private lands. This percentage is considerably less in Alabama (although accurate numbers are not available), but conservation of the RCW on private lands is still important to the species' recovery. Many private landowners take pride in their management of forest lands in such a way as to maintain healthy populations of this rare but interesting species. But some landowners feel threatened by the legal responsibilities and restrictions of the Endangered Species Act when an endangered species occupies a portion of their property. Some feel that they should or must manage their lands in a manner to prevent endangered species from occupying their property in order to avoid such restrictions. However, management techniques are possible that allow continued timber harvest within RCW habitat, while also maintaining the habitat suitable for protection of the RCW population. These techniques also help maintain a healthy southern pine forest, and benefit other desirable species as well, such as bobwhite quail. Management for pine straw production can also benefit RCW populations.



Longleaf pine forest with diverse understory (Joe Reinman).

Presence of RCW populations on private lands does create certain legal responsibilities for the landowner. However, these responsibilities are not excessive and do not prevent most types of timber management activities. The most significant restriction imposed by the Endangered Species Act makes it illegal to "take" any endangered species, with "take" meaning to kill, shoot, wound, hunt, pursue, trap, capture, collect, harass, or harm, including habitat modification which impairs breeding, feeding, or sheltering. Timber may be harvested within RCW habitat, but landowners should

not cut or disturb cavity trees, and should not construct roads or structures within a “cluster” of cavity trees used by a group of RCWs. In addition the landowner must maintain minimum foraging habitat for each group, consisting of at least 75 acres with scattered mature pine trees (at least 3000 square feet of pine basal area consisting of pines 10 inches in diameter or larger – between 40 and 70 square feet per acre; and less than 20 square feet per acre of pines less than 10 inches). Midstory trees should be sparse and less than 7 ft in height, and total stand basal area, including hardwoods, should be less than 80 square feet per acre. [Note: A 10 inch tree has a basal area of approximately 0.5 square foot. A 20 inch tree has a basal area of approximately 2 square feet.]



Pine forest providing ideal foraging habitat for RCW with basal area of 40 (top) and 60 (bottom) sq ft per acre (Stan Stewart).

Safe Harbor Agreements

In order to encourage landowners with existing or potential RCW habitat to manage their lands in order to conserve RCW populations, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has implemented a plan termed “Safe Harbor”. This concept is intended to foster cooperation of landowners rather than resentment, and

benefit both endangered species and landowners simultaneously. A Safe Harbor agreement assures the landowner that if he (or she) restores or enhances habitat for an endangered species, he (or she) will not incur any new restrictions if these actions result in an increase in the occurrence of endangered species on the land. The landowner agrees to carry out activities expected to benefit an endangered species, but no added federal restrictions will be imposed should the numbers (or occurrences) of the species expand beyond a “baseline” level when the agreement is entered into. The RCW was the first species to benefit from a Safe Harbor agreement, when a program was approved and initiated in the Sandhills of North Carolina in 1995. Since that time, Safe Harbor agreements benefiting the RCW have been approved and implemented in Texas (1998), South Carolina (1998), Georgia (2000), Virginia (2000), Louisiana (2005), and Florida (2006). A Safe Harbor agreement for Alabama has been approved by the USFWS, and eligible landowners are encouraged to volunteer for this program. Both the RCW and the landowner will benefit.

The Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division (ADCNR-WFF) will hold permits issued by the USFWS relative to the Safe Harbor agreement in Alabama. The Alabama Natural Heritage Program serves as a technical consultant and liaison between ADCNR-WFF and the Safe Harbor participants.

Safe Harbor Goals and Benefits

As a participant in the Safe Harbor program, the landowner will sign a Safe Harbor Management Agreement (SHMA) with ADCNR-WFF, which will establish a “baseline” population for RCW presence on the property (or the number of RCW groups present). This baseline number could be zero if potential habitat exists that may attract birds in the future, but no RCW groups currently occur on the property. The landowner agrees to protect and manage the property to maintain cavity trees and foraging habitat for the baseline population, and implement habitat improvements, such as prescribed burning and hardwood tree removal, which may enhance RCW habitat. However, any increase in RCW numbers or groups will not increase legal responsibilities above the baseline level (even if it is zero). Thus the RCW population will benefit from habitat protection and enhancement, but the landowner will be protected from any additional restrictions on

timber management or other land uses. The agreement allows the landowner substantial flexibility in managing his land. Grant funds are also potentially available to help landowners improve habitat. The agreement can be terminated if the landowner chooses to do so in the future.

Successes

Safe Harbor programs have been very successful in other states. The first program in North Carolina is now over 10 years old, and has involved over 90 agreements and more than 50,000 acres. As of January, 2005, South Carolina and Georgia, with the largest populations of RCW, had enrolled 102 and 18 landowners, with 396,000 and 129,000 acres respectively. Overall, the program has helped to protect over 500 RCW active clusters.

Contact information

Landowners with forest lands supporting existing populations of red-cockaded woodpeckers, as well as those with potential habitat, are encouraged to enroll their property in this voluntary program. There is no minimum size requirement to qualify. Those interested in obtaining additional information, a full copy of the agreement, or to enroll property in the Safe Harbor program, are encouraged to contact:

Alabama Natural Heritage Program
1090 South Donahue Drive
Auburn University, AL 36849-5431
Phone: (334) 491-0780
(334) 324-1071 (cell)
email: bhastings@knology.net

or

AL Dept. of Conservation and Natural Resources
Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries
64 North Union Street, Suite 584
Post Office Box 301457
Montgomery, AL 36130-1457
Phone: 334-242-3469
Fax: 334-242-3032
E-mail: mark.sasser@dcnr.alabama.gov

Which is the Red-Cockaded Woodpecker?

Alabama's nine woodpecker species



- | | | |
|-----------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| 1) Red-cockaded | 4) Pileated | 7) Sapsucker |
| 2) Hairy | 5) Red-bellied | 8) Flicker |
| 3) Downy | 6) Red-headed | 9) Ivorybill (extirpated) |