

# RED-COCKADED WOODPECKER

NORTH CAROLINA WILDLIFE RESOURCES COMMISSION

*fact sheet, 2005*



The red-cockaded woodpecker is perhaps one of the most well-known endangered species in North Carolina. Found only in the southeastern United States, this small black-and-white woodpecker uses open stands of pine forests with trees that are 30 years or older for foraging and even more mature trees for nesting. The red-cockaded woodpecker is the only woodpecker to excavate nest cavities in live trees, and it can take a single bird up to seven years to excavate a nest cavity.

The red-cockaded woodpecker is a highly social animal. In fact, the red-cockaded woodpecker is the only southeastern woodpecker species that lives in family groups year-round. A family group usually consists of a breeding male, breeding female and one or more helpers. Helpers are typically male offspring from previous years' broods. Each family group lives in a "cluster" that is defined as the aggregate or collection of cavity trees occupied by one family group where each group member occupies their own cavity. Red-cockaded woodpeckers primarily feed on insects and spiders and will travel up to \_ mile from their cavities in search of food. To maintain healthy populations, they must have large areas of unfragmented habitat that can provide suitable acreage for foraging and enough old pine trees for cavity excavation.

At best, each group of woodpeckers will produce one brood per year with one to four young. Young females will typically leave the family group before they are 1 year old in search of a mate. Young males, however, sometimes remain with their family group during subsequent years to help with the incubation of nests, feeding the young and defending the territory.



## POPULATION STATUS AND THREATS

The red-cockaded woodpecker is listed by the federal government as endangered. Some populations have stabilized while others have increased but unfortunately, there are still some populations that continue to decline throughout the Southeast, particularly small and isolated ones. The most important threats

Red-cockaded woodpecker

**Unfragmented habitat** refers to broad expanses of a habitat that have not been broken up by human activities such as urbanization, agriculture and deforestation. Many wildlife species require unfragmented habitat to thrive and reproduce, especially if they must range over a wide area to find food and mates.

to our red-cockaded woodpecker population are habitat destruction and fire suppression. The longleaf pine forests used by red-cockaded woodpeckers once covered an estimated 92 million acres across the Southeast, but only about 3 percent of that acreage remains. Mature pine forests are often converted to housing developments, agricultural fields and short-rotation timber stands that are unsuitable for red-cockaded nesting and foraging habitat.

In the remaining habitat, fires are often suppressed, changing the forests' natural composition of plants. Fire in the long-leaf forest promotes the development of a grassy groundcover and pine canopy while maintaining the open conditions needed by red-cockaded woodpeckers for nesting and foraging. In the absence of fire, hardwoods will encroach upon pine savannas and flatwoods, creating a dense midstory and a tree canopy that is unsuitable for red-cockaded woodpeckers.

## HABITAT ENHANCEMENT

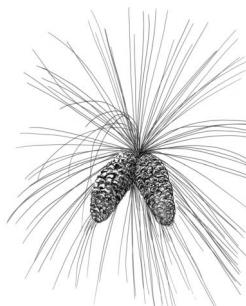
The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission is currently working on Commission-owned game lands and with other state and federal agencies in North Carolina to manage public property for the red-cockaded woodpecker. Management includes prescribed burning, hardwood midstory removal and selective timber harvesting techniques to enhance and maintain red-cockaded woodpecker habitat. To encourage population growth, Commission biologists also install artificial cavities in existing clusters when necessary and in potential recruitment sites. Commission biologists moni-

tor woodpecker clusters to determine nesting activity, nesting success, group size and group composition. This population monitoring helps biologists make their management decisions.

## LANDOWNER INVOLVEMENT

The Commission has also started working with nonfederal landowners to help protect southern pine forest habitat under a new program called the North Carolina Red-cockaded Woodpecker Safe Harbor Program. Through this program, the Commission is able to enter into Safe Harbor Management Agreements with non-federal landowners who voluntarily agree to implement, or allow on their land, management techniques beneficial to red-cockaded woodpeckers.

Enrolled landowners must agree to protect and maintain any existing red-cockaded woodpeckers and their habitat but may otherwise make any other lawful use of their property, such as timber production, pine-straw raking, home-site development or hunting and other recreational uses. This program benefits red-cockaded woodpeckers by protecting existing clusters and valuable habitat and contributes to overall recovery efforts by creating buffers around established populations and linking populations on federal lands with other functioning populations. By managing both private and public lands, the Commission can increase the amount and distribution of suitable red-cockaded woodpecker habitat in our state. The Safe Harbor Program is a great way for landowners to become actively involved in protecting the red-cockaded woodpecker population in North Carolina.



A Wildlife Commission biologist inserts an artificial nest cavity for red-cockaded woodpeckers into a tree.



Red-cockaded woodpeckers prefer the open, park-like conditions of the long leaf pine forest.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

1. Contact the Commission to participate in the N.C. Safe Harbor Program.
2. Keep some pine trees that are 10 inches or more in diameter at breast height (4.5 feet).
3. Maintain pine forests in an open, park-like condition with minimal hardwood midstory.
4. Keep mature pine stands on your property with trees greater than 50 years old.
5. Use and promote prescribed burning.
6. Educate yourself and others on woodpecker identification, biology and population trends.
7. Join a conservation organization to remain updated on current conservation efforts.
8. Donate to the N.C. Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Fund.

## NORTH CAROLINA WILDLIFE RESOURCES COMMISSION

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