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Red-bellied Woodpecker *Melanerpes carolinus*

Of the 7 woodpecker species which breed in Florida, the Red-bellied Woodpecker is the most abundant and widespread. It is highly adaptable and flourishes in a variety of human-altered habitats. This species resides in the eastern United States from Minnesota to Massachusetts to the north, and south to central Texas and the Florida Keys (AOU 1983).

Habitat. The Red-bellied Woodpecker can be found in pine scrub, hardwood swamps, cypress swamps, hammocks, mixed woods, pine flatwoods, sandhills, and agricultural areas throughout Florida. This bird does well in every habitat in the state where there are trees, including urban and suburban areas, and is not at all particular in its choice of nest tree. It will accept cavities in pine, cypress, palm, hardwood, or nest boxes.

Red-bellied Woodpeckers forage for insects, seeds, mast, fruit, and pulp in a wide variety of habitats from subtropical south Florida to the Panhandle. The proportion of plant material in the diet ranges from 44% in the spring to more than 80% in the fall and winter (Martin et al. 1951).

Although the Red-bellied Woodpecker may nest in cavities from 2 to 21 m (5 to 70 ft) above the ground, most nests are less than 12 m (40 ft) high (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). The cavity is excavated in 7 to 10 days (Bent 1939) and is 25 to 30 cm (10 to 12 in) deep. Often, more than 1 cavity exists in a suitable tree, but seldom, if ever, is there more than 1 pair of birds per tree. The adults may roost in the nest cavity and use the same cavity for nesting in successive years. Usually 4 or 5 white eggs are laid. Incubation takes 12 to 14 days, and the young fledge in 24 to 27 days (Jackson 1976, Ehrlich et al. 1988). In Florida, more than 1 brood may be reared in a season.

Although the Red-bellied Woodpecker is relatively aggressive in defense of its nest site, it occasionally suffers from competition for nesting cavities with the *European Starling* (Ingold 1989). On occasion in Florida, the Red-bellied Woodpecker has responded to nest usurpation by immediately building a second cavity nearby while the starlings are busy rearing their brood. They also avoid usurpation altogether by delaying cavity construction until after starlings have started nesting (H. Kale, pers. observ.).

Seasonal Occurrence. Egg dates range from April through July, and there may be as many as 3 broods per season (Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

Status. An examination of the map demonstrates that this species is all but ubiquitous in Florida. The agricultural areas to the south of Lake Okeechobee are largely devoted to sugarcane and are, therefore, virtually treeless, which explains the absence of Red-bellied Woodpeckers in this area. It is also missing from the sawgrass stands of the Holey Lands, the Rotenberger Tract, and portions of the Loxahatchee National Wildlife



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Refuge. With the exception of these areas, it breeds throughout Florida, including the Keys. Mangroves are not preferred habitat, but the Red-bellied Woodpecker does breed in hammocks and subtropical hardwoods in the Everglades and the Keys southwest to Key West.

While Red-bellied Woodpeckers were not confirmed in many blocks, they are relatively sedentary and probably do breed in almost every block where listed as a "possible" or "probable" breeder.

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