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Red-cockaded Woodpecker *Picoides borealis*

This species has suffered more obvious, dramatic losses than any other woodpecker in the southeast. It resides in 13 southeastern states from Texas and Oklahoma in the west, north to Kentucky, east to Virginia, and south to Florida (James 1995). The distribution of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker closely resembles the combined distributions of longleaf and shortleaf pines (Jackson 1971).

Habitat. The Red-cockaded Woodpecker inhabits open stands of frequently burned, mature pines with very little understory (Jackson 1994). In Florida, longleaf pine is preferred, although loblolly pine, slash pine, and pond pine are also used (Baker 1978). The Red-cockaded Woodpecker feeds primarily (80 to 95%) on arthropods, especially ants (Beal 1911, Martin et al. 1951).

The species depends on nest cavities excavated in living pines which are typically infected with the red heart fungus. The birds maintain flowing sap wells around the nest entrance, which apparently serve as a barrier to predatory snakes and perhaps other would-be nest robbers. Because red heart fungus is seldom found in pines less than 80 years old, nesting is highly local. Such trees are considered overmature from a commercial point of view, so this woodpecker is on a collision course with modern forestry.



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Red-cockaded Woodpeckers lay 2 to 5 white eggs. Incubation takes 10 to 13 days, and the young fledge at approximately 27 days of age (Ligon 1970). They are cooperative breeders, and juveniles (most often males) assist their parents in the rearing of their younger siblings (Jackson 1994).

Seasonal Occurrence. This species is a local, year-round resident of Florida. Eggs have been found between early April and mid-June.

Status. The most recent update of the status of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker in Florida (Cox et al. 1995) provides a comparison of woodpecker cluster sites recorded by the Florida Natural Areas Inventory to Atlas records. Six Atlas records are identified as "unique" records which warrant further investigation. These records are located in Escambia/Santa Rosa, Baker, Citrus, Manatee, Hendry, and St. Lucie counties.

An apparent increase in the number of active Red-cockaded Woodpecker clusters in Florida from 943 (Baker et al. 1980) to 1,139 (Wood and Wenner 1983) to 1,150 (Cox et al. 1995) undoubtedly reflects discovery of unknown groups rather than an increase in population size (Cox et al. 1995). More active clusters have recently been located in the newly acquired Goethe State Forest in Levy County (J. Hovis, pers. commun.).

Most of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker groups in Florida are found on federally owned land (80%), but state-owned lands, such as Blackwater and Withlacoochee state forests and the Webb and Corbett wildlife management areas, also support some significant populations. Improved habitat management on public lands and acquisition of key private lands should improve the conservation status of this species (Cox et al. 1995).

The preference of this endangered species for frequently burned, old-growth pine forest makes it highly vulnerable to modern forest management practices that favor younger, planted pines.

Inasmuch as private landowners have little incentive to preserve Red-cockaded Woodpecker habitat, only public lands offer much prospect for the long-term survival of this species. Timber policy in the national forests, especially the Apalachicola, is probably the most important single factor. In the last several years, colony sites in the Osceola National Forest have steadily increased to a total of 54 in 1996 (J. Monaghan, pers. commun.).

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