

# ENDANGERED SPECIES

This Species is Protected Under the Endangered Species Act of 1973

## RED-COCKADED WOODPECKER

*Picoides borealis*



In the mid-1800s, naturalist John Audubon reported that the red-cockaded woodpecker was found abundantly in the pine forests of the southeastern United States. Historically, this woodpecker's range extended from Florida to New Jersey, as far west as Texas and Oklahoma, and inland to Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee.

Today it is estimated that there are about 4,500 family units of red-cockaded woodpeckers, or 10,000 to 14,000 birds, living in clusters (groups of cavity trees) from Florida to Virginia and west to southeast Oklahoma and eastern Texas, representing about 1 percent of the woodpecker's original range.

About the size of the common cardinal, the red-cockaded woodpecker is approximately 7 inches long (18 to 20 cm), with a wingspan of about 15 inches (35 to 38 cm). Its back is barred with black and white horizontal stripes. The red-cockaded woodpecker's most distinguishing feature is a black cap and nape (the back of the neck) that encircle large white cheek patches. Rarely visi-

ble, except perhaps during the breeding season and periods of territorial defense, the male has a small red streak on each side of its black cap called a cockade, hence its name.

The red-cockaded woodpecker makes its home in mature pine forests; more specifically, those with long-leaf pines averaging 80 to 120 years old and loblolly pines averaging 70 to 100 years old. While other woodpeckers bore out cavities in dead trees where the wood is rotten and soft, the red-cockaded woodpecker is the only one which excavates cavities exclusively in living pine trees.

The older pines favored by the red-cockaded woodpecker often suffer from a fungus called red heart disease which attacks the center of the trunk, causing the inner wood to become soft. Cavities generally take 1 to 3 years to excavate.

The red-cockaded woodpecker feeds mainly on beetles, ants, roaches, caterpillars, wood-boring insects, and spiders, and occasionally fruits and berries.

Red-cockaded woodpeckers are a territorial, nonmigratory, cooperative

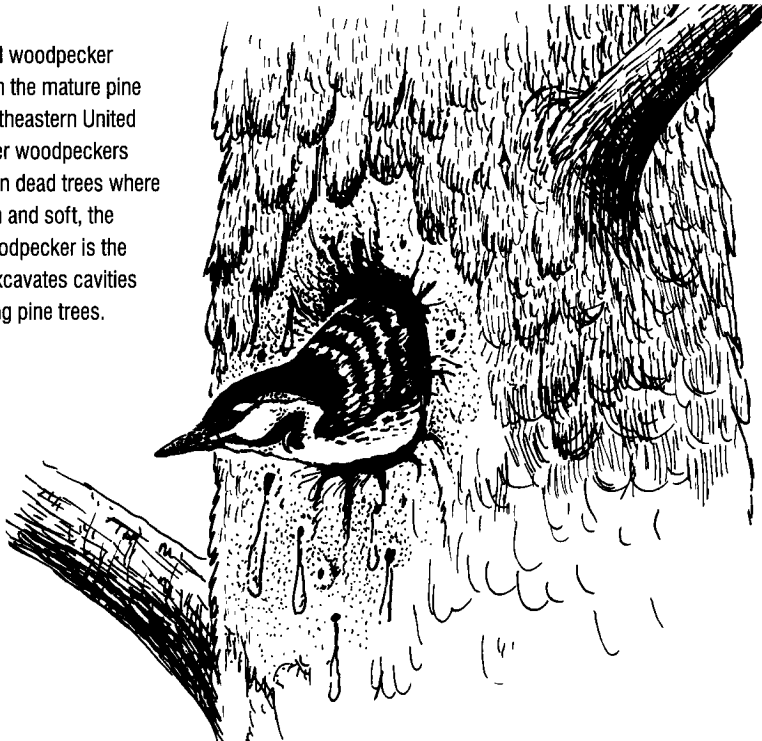
breeding species, frequently having the same mate for several years. The nesting season lasts from April through June. The breeding female lays three to four eggs in the breeding male's roost cavity. Group members incubate the small white eggs for 10 to 12 days. Once hatched, the nestlings remain in the nest cavity for about 26 days.

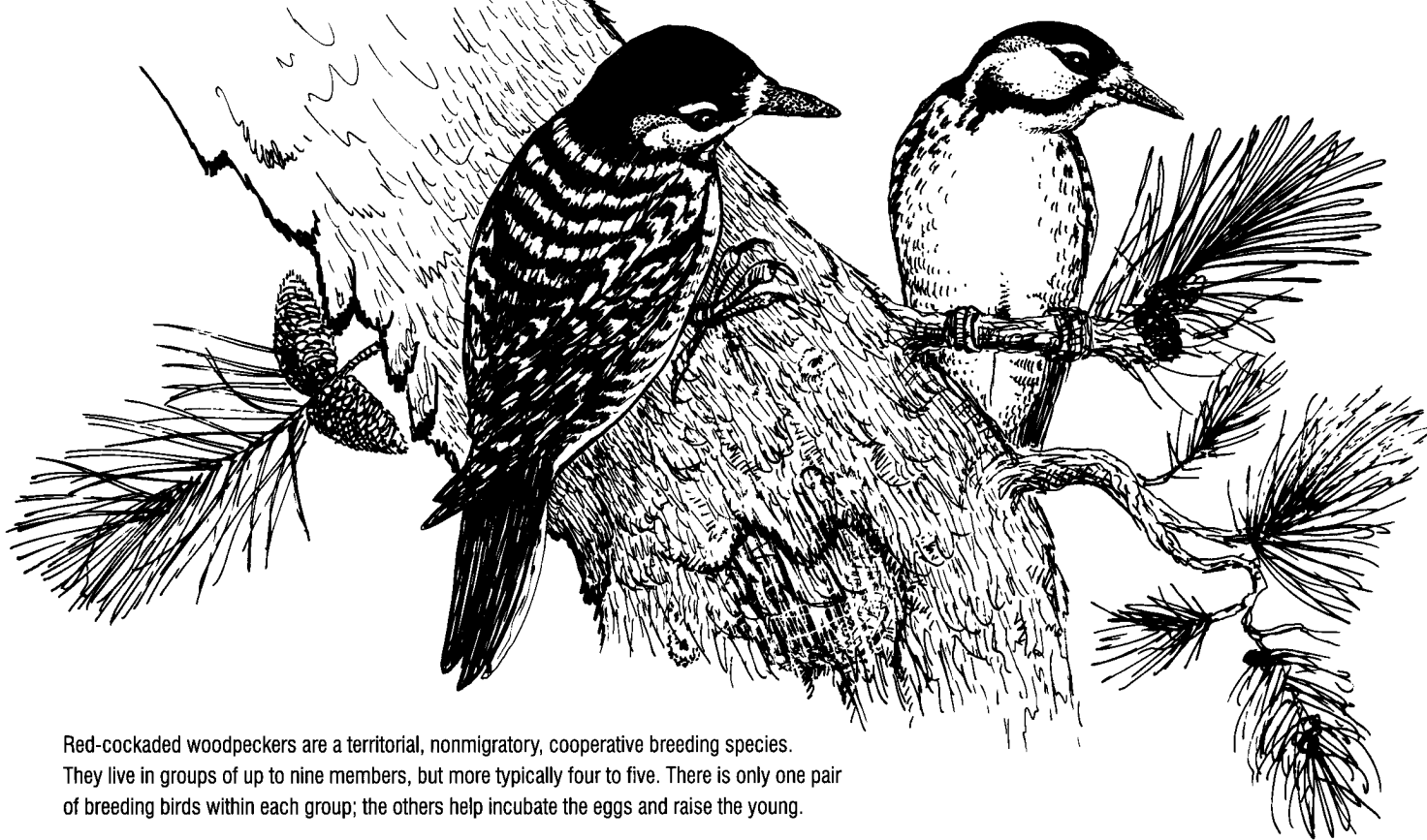
Upon fledging, the young often remain with the parents, forming groups of up to nine members, but more typically four to five members. There is only one pair of breeding birds within each group, and they normally raise only a single brood each year. The other group members, usually males from the previous breeding season, help incubate the eggs and raise the young. Juvenile females generally leave the group before the next breeding season, in search of single male groups.

Each group needs an average of 200 acres of old pine forest to support its foraging and nesting habitat needs. Some groups have been successful on fewer acres while others require as many as 300 acres to support themselves.

Rat snakes are a primary predator of red-cockaded woodpeckers. Agile tree climbers, rat snakes eat woodpecker eggs and nestlings. But the red-cockaded woodpecker has an effective means of defense. It chips small holes (called resin wells) in the bark of the cavity tree, above and below the cavity. From these wells, sap (resin) oozes down the trunk of the tree. When the snake comes in contact with the sap, the sap adheres to the scales on its underside. Even tiny amounts of resin inhibit the movement of the scales, preventing the snake from climbing higher.

The red-cockaded woodpecker makes its home in the mature pine forests of the southeastern United States. While other woodpeckers bore out cavities in dead trees where the wood is rotten and soft, the red-cockaded woodpecker is the only one which excavates cavities exclusively in living pine trees.





Red-cockaded woodpeckers are a territorial, nonmigratory, cooperative breeding species. They live in groups of up to nine members, but more typically four to five. There is only one pair of breeding birds within each group; the others help incubate the eggs and raise the young.

Red-cockaded woodpeckers spend a significant amount of time and energy each day maintaining the flow of the resin wells. If the tree should die, or the damage from maintaining the wells becomes so great that the sap stops flowing, the woodpeckers will eventually abandon the cavity tree.

The red-cockaded woodpecker plays a vital role in the intricate web of life of the southern pine forests. A number of other birds and small mammals use the nest cavities excavated by red-cockaded woodpeckers, such as chickadees, bluebirds, titmice, and several other woodpecker species, including the downy, hairy, and red-bellied woodpecker. Larger woodpeckers may take over a red-cockaded woodpecker cavity, sometimes enlarging the hole enough to allow screech owls, wood ducks, and even raccoons to later move in. Flying squirrels, several species of reptiles and amphibians, and insects, primarily bees and wasps, also will use red-cockaded cavities.

From the late 1800s to the mid 1900s, the red-cockaded woodpecker rapidly declined as its mature pine forest habitat was altered for a variety of uses, primarily timber harvest and agriculture. The species was listed as endangered in

1970 (under a law that preceded the Endangered Species Act of 1973), which means the species is considered in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has developed a recovery strategy for the red-cockaded woodpecker that includes the participation of other federal and state agencies and private landowners.

Most of the forested pine areas old and large enough to provide adequate habitat for the red-cockaded woodpecker are on federal lands. The U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Defense have developed special management guidelines for woodpecker habitat areas on National Forests and military installations.

While red-cockaded woodpecker recovery is dependent upon federal land protection, the Fish and Wildlife Service also is developing cooperative conservation agreements with states and private landowners, too.

In 1993, the Georgia-Pacific Company established a landmark conservation agreement with the Fish and Wildlife Service to help protect the red-cockaded woodpecker on thousands of acres of company land. Since that time,

two more companies, Hancock Timber Resource Group and Champion International Corporation, have established similar conservation agreements with the Fish and Wildlife Service to protect the red-cockaded woodpecker on their lands. Three other companies are currently working with the Fish and Wildlife Service to develop conservation agreements.

The red-cockaded woodpecker once shared its pine forest habitat with the ivory-billed woodpecker, the largest North American woodpecker, now generally considered to be extinct. But there is still hope for the red-cockaded woodpecker, with continuing cooperative efforts. In fact, some populations are now stable or increasing.

---

## BIOLOGUE SERIES

Prepared by:  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
1995

