

30 YEARS OF THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

RED-COCKADED WOODPECKER

Reduced to only one percent of its former range, the red-cockaded woodpecker has become as rare as its beleaguered habitat. However, the Endangered Species Act is providing hope for the restoration of an important ecosystem and the woodpecker itself.

HISTORY OF ENDANGERMENT

In the early 1900s, vast stands of centuries-old pines stretched from the Atlantic coast to Oklahoma. The red-cockaded woodpecker is dependent on these mature forests for both nesting and feeding. The birds use their sharp beaks to hammer nesting cavities into living pines. Holes drilled around these cavities cause sap to run down the tree trunks in rivulets, helping to prevent predators from climbing up to the nests.



Jim Hanula/U.S. Forest Service

Woodpeckers search for their insect food in pine stands at least 30 years old. Today, these old pine forests are largely gone, as trees are often cut before they mature. Only one percent of the woodpecker's habitat remains; logging and deforestation have claimed the rest. Fire suppression has also adversely altered the woodpecker's habitat.

In the past, these birds ranged from New Jersey to Florida and west to Oklahoma. Today, fewer than 15,000 survive. The species has been completely wiped out in New Jersey, Kentucky, Tennessee, Maryland, and Missouri. Across the rest of its range, the woodpecker exists in isolated groups requiring careful management.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

By the 1960s, studies indicated that the species might soon become extinct. Consequently, the bird was added to the Endangered Species List in 1970. Even after listing, however, traditional logging practices on public lands allowed the harvesting ancient pines.

Over the past 25 years, the Endangered Species Act has placed restrictions on habitat modifications. Consequently, the U.S. Forest Service and the military, both of which have lands containing large woodpecker populations, have adopted better woodland management. For example, Camp LeJeune Marine Corps Base has an active conservation program to restore woodpecker habitat while still maintaining lands for military training.

CONSERVATION TODAY

Although stabilizing red-cockaded woodpecker populations on public lands is important, it is only a part of the effort to conserve the species. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has looked to private landowners to help the species survive.

Since 1995, over 500,000 acres of private lands have been enrolled in conservation programs designed to benefit the woodpecker. Also, many forest product companies have developed habitat conservation plans for the woodpecker.

Efforts on both public and private lands have benefited from new techniques, supported by Endangered Species Act funding, to drill artificial nest cavities and to reintroduce birds into restored habitat.

ECOLOGICAL VALUE

The woodpecker's diligent work creating cavities in pine trunks is beneficial for several species in the ecosystem. The cavities frequently provide shelter to other birds, as well as a variety of reptiles, amphibians, bees, wasps, and squirrels.

OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

Building on Endangered Species Act protections, management of the woodpecker's habitat must continue for the species to fully recover.

The Sandhills area of North Carolina is home to two populations, found on Fort Bragg and Camp Mackall, separated by several miles. Restoration of the intervening habitat on private lands is key. Fortunately, well over 30,000 acres of these intervening lands are now being voluntarily managed for the bird by private landowners through incentives under the Endangered Species Act.



Ralph Costa/FWS



Ralph Costa/FWS