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The Red-cockaded Woodpecker

On Enon and Sehoj Plantations

An Endangered Species

The Red-cockaded Woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*), a.k.a. “RCW,” has been listed as endangered since 1973 primarily due to habitat loss. Historically found from New Jersey to Texas, its range is now greatly restricted, and about 20,000 birds remain in 11 southern states. More than 90 percent are on public lands such as national forests and military reservations, and these populations are for the most part stable or increasing. Most populations on private lands are decreasing due to lack of proper management and isolation from other populations. In Alabama, the formerly widespread RCW survives today only on four National Forest districts, one area near Lake Mitchell north of Montgomery, and here at Enon and Sehoj.

A Rare Habitat

Until about 60 years ago, open, mature pine forests were not uncommon on private lands in the South, but modern logging practices and fire suppression have changed that. The RCW is a habitat specialist, requiring these park-like forests for nesting and foraging. As this habitat has declined, so has the woodpecker, and the birds on Enon and Sehoj are the last remnant of the east central Alabama population. Regular prescribed burning and the practice of growing pines to full maturity maintains ideal habitat for both Red-cockaded Woodpeckers and Bobwhite Quail.



The white paint bands seen on the property denote woodpecker cavity trees that form a “cluster.” A cluster supports a single family group.

Biology

Red-cockaded Woodpeckers are the only North American woodpecker that excavate cavities in living pines. Old trees (>80 years) are required because younger trees do not have enough sap-free heartwood. Due to past land use, even the largest pines on Enon and Sehoj are just now approaching suitable maturity for cavity excavation. These small black and white (males have just a speck of red) birds live in family groups in an aggregation of cavity trees called a cluster. Family groups, consisting of a breeding pair and 1-4 "helpers" (male offspring from previous years), defend territories of approximately 200 acres. Active cavity trees have considerable sap on the trunks that flow from resin wells created by the birds. The sap deters climbing snakes. Nesting season is from April through July. Four white eggs are laid in the breeding male's roost cavity, incubated by all family members, and hatch in 11 days. Diet is insects and spiders. Cavity competition can be severe from other birds and Flying Squirrels. Many other species use enlarged/abandoned cavities, including Pileated Woodpeckers, Screech Owls, and Wood Ducks.



Installing an artificial cavity

Management and Monitoring

Prescribed burning and retention of older pines alone is insufficient when RCW populations are as small as ours was in 2006 (only four groups). If critically small populations such as ours are to be saved, two techniques are employed: 1.) provisioning of artificial cavities and 2.) translocation of surplus young birds from larger "donor" populations. Artificial cavities (fabricated insert boxes) can be installed by biologists in 45 minutes instead of the 1-10 years it takes for the birds to excavate a cavity. Artificial cavities can be used to provide each group member with a roost cavity, and also to provide an instant cluster, or recruitment site, when population expansion is desired. To track success, each Red-cockaded Woodpecker on Enon and Sehoj is uniquely color-banded for recognition through a spotting scope. Each spring, nesting is closely monitored with the use of a remote video camera on a long pole. When nestlings are 6-8 days old, they are banded and logged in the database.



Six-day-old nestling before banding

Safe Harbor

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources have partnered with the Lanier family to ensure that RCWs will reside in southeast Alabama for future generations to experience. Through a procedure called a Safe Harbor Agreement, the landowner is provided regulatory assurances that if RCWs increase on the property, no new restrictions will be put into place. This protects the private landowner while providing habitat for an endangered species. Enon and Sehoj were the first properties in Alabama to enroll in the program, and together are the largest property enrolled.



Recording color leg band patterns for nestlings

A Success Story

In 2006, the Alabama Forest Resources Center received a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to restore the dwindling RCW population on Enon and Sehoj. Since then, 16 birds have been translocated (8 each in 2007 and 2008) from Georgia and 16 recruitment clusters have been created. Nearly 80 artificial cavities have been installed. As of spring 2009, six of the recruitment clusters are occupied, along with three original clusters. In 2007, prior to translocation, only two groups nested, and only one succeeded in fledging a single chick. In 2008, five groups nested, fledging *nine* chicks. Enon and Sehoj are the only privately-owned properties that are receiving translocated RCWs to restore a population that was certain to be lost. Additional translocations are planned, and the goal is to bridge the seven-mile gap between the Sehoj (west) and Enon (east) populations with occupied clusters to eventually have a single, self-sufficient population. With continued careful management, the RCWs of Enon and Sehoj, once nearly gone forever, now have a bright future.



Adult male RCW, displaying his red "cockade"



Checking leg bands before the move from Ft. Benning



Nighttime translocation to new cavity on Sehoj



Burning is key to RCW and quail management