

# Big Cypress

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Big Cypress  
National Preserve



NPS/RALPH ARWOOD

## Red-cockaded Woodpecker

*The endangered red-cockaded woodpecker is a “keystone” species that reflects the health of its southern forest home, the same home vital to deer, turkey, panthers and people. The red-cockaded woodpecker struggles to find older pines in territories not fragmented by development. The slash pine (*Pinus elliottii*) ecosystem in which it thrives has been reduced by 97 percent, and many populations of the woodpecker continue to decline. Big Cypress National Preserve contains many healthy stands of slash pines that also support this unique bird.*

What does “home” mean to you? For the red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*), the ideal home is in an old longleaf pine tree that is between 64-149 years of age! Old living pines desired by the woodpeckers have thinner sapwood and more heartwood than other pines. Surveys in 1979 and 1980 revealed Big Cypress National Preserve supports a population of red-cockaded woodpeckers, a federally-listed endangered species. Pine forests found within the national preserve constitute an ideal roosting and nesting area for the birds. These forests have little understory growth, primarily due to fires and seasonal flooding.

### Building a Home

Did you know that the red-cockaded woodpecker is the only North American woodpecker that roosts and excavates its nest in living trees? The woodpecker builds its home or cavity by carving out a hole with its bill like a construction worker using a jackhammer to break up cement. Holes drilled into the pine are constructed at an upward angle to prevent rain from entering the chamber.

The birds remove bark from around their cavity to make it smooth and encourage resin wells from the sap of the tree to form around the hole. The slippery sap from the resin wells help keep out predators or unwanted neighbors, such as rat snakes. Cavities can be drilled in a matter of months, but one to three years is more typical. Preferring open areas, red-cockaded woodpeckers will abandon their homes if bushy vegetation reaches 15 feet or higher near the tree.

### Starting a New Family

Typically a red-cockaded woodpecker can begin breeding at one year of age. The best nesting success rates occurs late April-June. Clutch size is between two to four eggs. Incubation takes 10-11 days. Young woodpeckers fledge in 28-29 days and are dependent on their family for survival until they are two to five months old. Frequently within the year the young female birds, also known as “floaters,” fledge or leave the nest. Floaters look to start their own families by joining a red-cockaded woodpecker group searching for a female floater to complete a breeding pair.

### Red-cockaded Woodpecker Identification

- Relatively slender, long-tailed, and small-billed.
- Adult length 8.5”, wingspan 14”, weight 1.5 ounces (44 grams). Males slightly bigger.
- White cheek patches, black cap and neck, black and white barred back wings.
- Males have a few red feathers above and behind the eyes, the “cockade.” Red is covered with black feathers so not readily seen. Females do not have any red on them
- Immature males have a red “patch” in the center of their black crown on heads.

## Family Tree

It takes many birds with unique family roles to help create an individual woodpecker's family tree. The red-cockaded woodpecker is a territorial (non-migratory) bird. Its cooperative social clan or family consists of a pair of breeding birds (a pair that stays together until one dies) and three helpers. "Helpers" are typically immature males usually from the breeding pair of the previous year. Helpers defend the cavity territory and help with feeding the young nesting birds while living in their own cavities. The birds nest and forage together in a "cluster" or group of active cavity trees forming a colony.

## What is on the Food Menu?

Red-cockaded woodpeckers feed on what they can find by picking away at the bark on trees or by capturing flying insects. The woodpeckers also feed on vegetation. Specials that could be featured on the red-cockaded woodpecker menu include larvae, beetles, ants, roaches, and spiders. Male red-cockaded woodpeckers often feed near tree tops while females eat lower on the trees. Perhaps this feeding in different areas of the tree helps prevent the breed from being in competition with one another when food sources are low.

## Survival

The areas where red-cockaded woodpeckers live are threatened by habitat loss, fragmentation, and lack of fire or infrequent fire that maintains habitat quality in Florida. Although South Florida is not a designated recovery population for red-cockaded woodpeckers, the area contains significant support populations for recovery of the species in the southeast. Eighty-one percent of South Florida's red-cockaded woodpecker colonies have successfully produced young.

Help for the red-cockaded woodpecker can be provided. One way is by continuing to support survey projects conducted for the red-cockaded woodpecker. Also providing snags can be important. Snags are trees that are decaying or dead. Providing snags will give other

woodpeckers a place to live so they won't be competing against the red-cockaded woodpeckers for live trees. In addition to saving snags, conserving "starts" is another way to support the red-cockaded woodpecker. Starts are incomplete holes or cavities in a tree. These incomplete homes may have been started by a woodpecker or created artificially with the idea it might become a woodpecker dwelling. Lastly, land managers can control the height of understory by setting prescribed fires every three to five years outside of the woodpeckers' nesting season.



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**Firefighters start prescribed fires to burn trees and shrubs at the mid-story level. This clears more foraging space for red-cockaded woodpeckers along the slash pine trees.**

## Did you know?

A cockade is a ribbon or feather worn on the side of a hat. The red-cockaded woodpecker gets its name from the red feathers located on the side of male woodpeckers' heads (see the picture below).

## References

Birds of North America, Jackson, J.A., 1994.

US Fish & Wildlife Safe Harbor Agreement: [www.fws.gov/endangered/recovery/harborqa.pdf](http://www.fws.gov/endangered/recovery/harborqa.pdf)

US Fish & Wildlife Service, South Florida Multi Species Recovery Plan, Red Cockaded Woodpecker: <http://www.fws.gov/verobeach/Programs/Recovery/vbms4.html>

US Fish & Wildlife Service: <http://www.fws.gov>

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**A male red-cockaded woodpecker with the hard to see, but identifying cockade.**