

Red-cockaded Woodpecker



Francis Marion National Forest



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Forest Service
Southern Region

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The red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*), also known as RCW, was once common in the mature pine forests of the southeast. It lived from east Texas to Florida and north to Missouri, Kentucky and Maryland. Today, there are an estimated 10,000-14,000 birds living in a range that spans south from Virginia to Florida and west to Oklahoma and east Texas, representing about one percent of its original range. The Francis Marion National Forest has the second highest population of RCWs in the world. A major hurricane (Hugo) in 1989 destroyed 87 percent of the trees RCW resides in and wiped out 63 percent of the birds. Extensive longleaf pine restoration efforts have proven successful and now more than 340 family groups live in the forest. Their survival depends on continual restoration and aggressive burning.

RCWs are territorial, non-migratory, cooperative breeders who make their homes in mature forests of longleaf and loblolly pine.

They nest from April to July in family units of two to nine birds, with one breeding pair per unit. Unlike many species of woodpecker, the RCW excavates cavities only in living pine trees. These cavities can take one to three years to construct.

The RCW is about the size of a bluebird, seven inches tall with black and white horizontal stripes across its back, and a distinct black cap with large white cheek patches. A small red streak or cockade is sometimes visible on males.

To view an RCW on the forest, look for the cavity trees marked with double white bands painted near the base. Your best chance for spotting one is by standing near an active cavity tree within two hours of sunrise or sunset. Their call is an abrupt, almost scolding, singular squeak.

For more information

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