The Red Cockaded Woodpecker

Provides boreholes or the Red Cockaded Woodpecker (RCW), measures about 7 inches in length, with a wingspan of approximately 15 inches, has distinctive white cheek patches and a black and white ladder pattern on its back. Males have a red stripe of feathers which run along the sides of their black caps, but are usually not visible. RCW’s have a complex social structure. (Conner, et al., 2001) Living in groups of up to 6 individuals, they employ a cooperative breeding strategy, with helper males aiding the brooding individuals with the incubation, brooding and feeding of offspring. (Costa 2002) The RCW’s diet consists mostly of insects found in or on the bark of pine trees, although they are also known to derive a small part of their diet from seeds and fruit. (USFWS 2003; Hess and James, 1998) The species is highly dependent on very specific habitat for survival. (Beyer, et al. 1996; USFWS 2003)

RCW’s also require habitat with little to no hardwood mid-story present, a condition that in nature is caused by occasional, naturally occurring fires (USFWS 2003). Anthropogenic interference via fire suppression has allowed hardwood mid-stories to grow and thrive, resulting in the abandonment of RCW nesting clusters (USFWS 2003). Today, regularly scheduled prescribed burns are an integral part of RCW habitat conservation (USFWS 2003). Surveys of potentially suitable habitat are conducted in order to identify it for the purposes of conservation as well as for eligibility requirements for receiving translocated RCW’s.

Habitat Conservation

The RCW excaves roosting and nesting cavities exclusively in live pine trees (Costa 2002), where resins secreted by shallow wells the birds maintain offer some degree of protection from predators and kleptoparasitic species (USFWS 2003; Costa 2002). Because of this, RCW’s favor older trees, possibly because their heartwood is more likely to be softened by red heart fungus Phellinus pin, and easier to excavate. (USFWS 2003; Beyer, et al. 1996). Excavation of a cavity can take from between 1 and 6 years to complete (Costa 2002).

Cavity Management

Because cavities take so long for the birds to excavate naturally, as a recovery measure, artificial cavities are installed with very good success (USFWS 2003) in areas of suitable habitat where there is a shortage of natural cavities. These cavities can either be a hole drilled directly into the tree, or may take the form of a box which is inserted into an opening cut into the tree with a chainsaw.

Translocation

Translocation of birds from areas with healthy populations to areas with at risk populations has proven to be an effective method of boosting populations in at risk areas as well as enhancing genetic diversity within the breeding populations of isolated areas (USFWS 2003; Costa 2002). RCW’s are monitored by using unique color coded bands on their legs. Typically installed shortly after hatching, this system allows the success of translocation and recovery efforts to be measured, and facilitates accurate population counts.

Conclusion

The outlook for the RCW looks promising. Translocation has resulted in the establishment of many new populations across Florida, and strengthened existing ones. This strategy employed alongside RCW habitat conservation and the remediation of areas with the potential to become RCW habitat appears to have turned the tide in the favor of the species’ survival, but there is still a long way to go. The 2003 United States Fish and Wildlife Service RCW Recovery Plan estimates that with full implementation, down-listing may occur circa 2050, followed by delisting somewhere around 2075 (USFWS 2003).

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For any interest or inquiries, contact Kevin Metz at Metzkm@my.palmbeachstate.com

References


The Red Cockaded Woodpecker

The Red Cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) is a cavity-nesting bird endemic to the southeastern United States. It relies on dead or dying pine trees as nesting cavities and is listed as an endangered species by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The RCW's habitat is declining due to habitat loss and fragmentation, making the species vulnerable to extinction.

Habitat Conservation

The RCW excavates roosting and nesting cavities exclusively in live pine trees. These cavities are very specific and require a cavity to be bored by the RCW, which can take anywhere from 1 to 6 years to complete. Once a cavity is made, it can provide shelter for R CW's for decades. The RCW excavates very specific cavities for their roosting and nesting needs, which is a key factor in their success.

Translocation

Translocation programs have been implemented to assist in the recovery of the Red Cockaded Woodpecker. The Southern Range Translocation Cooperative (SRTC) uses a graph to gauge the success of translocation efforts. The graph is used by the SRTC to measure the number of translocated RCW's, the number of active clusters, and the number of birds that have been successfully translocated. This graph is used to determine whether or not translocation efforts are successful.

Conclusion

The outlook for the RCW looks promising. Translocation efforts have resulted in the establishment of many new populations across Florida, and strengthened existing ones. This strategy employed alongside RCW habitat conservation and the remediation of areas with the potential to become RCW habitat appears to have turned the tide in favor of the species' survival, but there is still a long way to go.

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