

Everything you wanted to know, or maybe didn't want to know about our woodpeckers...

Or... Why is the ARB so concerned about our longleaf pine trees?

I have seen a lot of different types of woodpeckers here in The National; it's hard to tell them apart in some cases.

Not so easily identified are the Downy woodpecker, the Hairy woodpecker and the most rare as well as an endangered species, the Red-cockaded woodpecker.

The Hairy woodpecker is about 9 ½" with a large bill and a striped head and black and white checking on its back. It also has a distinct "military" posture.

The Downy woodpecker is the smallest of the woodpeckers at about 6 ½ "and quite similar to the Hairy woodpecker.

See if you can tell them apart in the image/picture below.



Figure 1: Courtesy of redhousegarden.com

The Hairy woodpecker is on the left in the picture above and the Downy woodpecker is to the right in the same picture. Note the size difference between the two, the length of their bills, and the postures of the birds.

The males of both types have a touch of red flashing on the back of their heads, but if there is a black line running through it, it most likely is a Hairy woodpecker (right picture below).



Figure 2: Left and Right, Courtesy of redhousegarden.com

The Red-cockaded woodpecker, rarest of all our woodpeckers and an endangered species. It's the reason why our ARB has rules in place to prevent our mature longleaf pines from being removed. We are right in the midst of their natural habitat.



Figure 3: Left: Courtesy of lookseek.com, Right: Courtesy of Sandhillsecological.org

About the size of the common Cardinal, the Red-cockaded woodpecker is approximately 7-8" long. Its back is barred with black and white horizontal stripes. The Red-cockaded woodpecker's most distinguishing feature is a black cap and nape that encircle large white cheek patches. The male may have a small red streak on each side of its black cap called a cockade, hence its name.

The RCW is a species reliant on old and second growth pines for nesting. As nearly 90 million acres of virgin longleaf pine was logged in North America and so resulted a drastic RCW population decline. Historical population estimates for the RCW were around 1 million individuals which had dipped perilously low to less than 10,000 by the mid-1900s. Consequently, it was one of the first species listed as endangered in 1968 and then protected in 1973 under the Endangered Species Act.

The RCW is the only North American woodpecker to excavate roost and nest cavities in living pine trees.



Figure 4: Courtesy of audubon.org

The birds scale the outer bark off the tree above and below the cavity entrance, exposing sapwood around the cavity entrance forming a 'plate' around the cavity. Resin flowing from the wells created by the RCWs may eventually coat the trunk, thus making the cavity tree conspicuous from a distance, giving it a candle-like appearance. Cavities are excavated in mature pines, generally over 80 years old. The older trees are chosen for cavity excavation because the trees need to be mature enough to have sufficient heartwood for a cavity free of sap and because many mature trees are infected with **red heart fungus**. This fungus softens the heartwood and allows for easier excavation of the roosting chamber.

Individual cavities are known that have been used by RCWs for over six generations, or approximately 30 years. A cluster for a group of RCW consists of 1 to 20 or more cavity trees with the average cluster being about 10 acres.

Besides being unique among North American woodpeckers, in the southern pine ecosystem there are many 'secondary' cavity users that benefit from the RCWs work. RCWs are considered a '**keystone**' species because use of their cavities by these animals contributes to the species richness of the pine forest. At least 27 species of vertebrates have been documented using RCW cavities, either for roosting or nesting. Species include birds, snakes, lizards, squirrels and frogs. A number of other birds and small mammals use the cavities excavated by Red-cockaded woodpeckers, such as chickadees, bluebirds, titmice, and several other woodpecker species, including the Downy, Hairy, and Red-bellied woodpecker. Larger woodpeckers may take over a Red-cockaded woodpecker cavity, sometimes enlarging the hole enough to allow screech owls, wood ducks, and even raccoons to later move in. Flying squirrels, several species of reptiles and amphibians, and insects, primarily bees and wasps, also will use Red-cockaded woodpecker cavities.

Other woodpeckers on our properties include...

The **Pileated woodpecker**. It is huge, over a foot long, the size of a crow. It is particularly striking because of its size and upright flaming red crest and solid black body...



Figure 5: Courtesy of writer

The **Red-headed woodpecker** is also a common visitor and very pretty with its full bright red head, white breastplate, solid black back and white rump feathers... It is large in size at 8 ½-9 ½”.



Figure 6: Courtesy of writer

The Red-bellied woodpecker 9-10 ½” also has a red head but is easily distinguished from the Red-headed woodpecker by the reddish orange nature of its color and the black and white zebra striping on its back.



Figure 7: Courtesy of writer

Information about the Red-cockaded woodpecker was drawn from the following sources which are heartedly recommended reading...

https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Carolina_Sandhills/wildlife_and_habitat/woodpecker.html

<http://sandhillsecological.org/education/red-cockaded-woodpeckers/>

https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/esa_works/profile_pages/RedcockadedWoodpecker