

Francis Marion National Forest South Carolina Red-cockaded Woodpecker



Southern Region, USDA Forest Service

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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 to 14,000 birds, living from Florida to Virginia and west to southeast Oklahoma and eastern Texas, representing about 1 percent of the woodpecker's original range. The Francis Marion National Forest has the second highest population of red-cockaded woodpeckers in the world. A major hurricane in 1989 destroyed 87% of cavity trees and 63% of the birds. Extensive longleaf pine ecosystem restoration efforts have proven successful. Now over 340 family groups live in the forest. Their survival depends on continued restoration, and aggressive burning.

About the size of a bluebird, approximately 7 inches tall, its back is barred with black and white horizontal stripes. Its most distinguishing feature is a black cap with large white cheek patches. A small red streak, or cockade, is sometimes visible on males.

The red-cockaded woodpecker makes its home in mature pine forests, consisting primarily of longleaf and loblolly pine. While other woodpeckers bore out cavities in rotten and soft wood in dead trees, the red-cockaded woodpecker excavates cavities exclusively in living pine trees. Constructing a cavity can take from 1 to 3 years, as a result.

These insect eaters are territorial, non-migratory and cooperative breeders. They nest from April to July with only one breeding pair per family unit. A family unit consists of 2 to 9 individuals.

To view a red-cockaded woodpecker in the Francis Marion, look for pine trees with double white bands painted near the base--these are cavity trees. If you stand in the vicinity of an active cavity tree within 2 hours of sunrise or sunset, your chances of spotting an RCW are pretty high. Their flight pattern is undulating, typical of woodpeckers and flickers, and their call is an abrupt, almost scolding, singular, squeak.

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