

The Safe Harbor Program and the Red-Cockaded Woodpecker

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Since the passage of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1973, fear and concern over the presence of an endangered species on an individual's property has often resulted in landuse practices that are not only incompatible for attracting certain wildlife but also contrary to the landowner's preferred management goals and directives. Such management practices are sometimes carried out in order to avoid federally imposed restrictions on the type of management practices a landowner may pursue should an endangered species occupy a portion of their property. Sadly, the landowner suffers by taking such actions, and the toll on wildlife is obvious; less habitat to support them leaving behind small and isolated populations, if they continue to persist at all.

An estimated 90 percent of the imperiled plants and animals that occur in the U.S. depend, exclusively or in part, upon habitat that is under private ownership for their survival. If the ultimate goal of the ESA is to be realized (which is to recover the decline of an endangered or threatened species to the point of delisting), successful strategies for providing lasting conservation on private lands must be developed and

implemented. Unfortunately, few incentives exist under the ESA for private landowners to actively manage their land for the benefit of imperiled species. In 1995, a concept was introduced by then Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt in an attempt to reverse such management "disincentives" for non-federal landowners. This concept has been termed Safe Harbor and is a means of assuring a landowner who agrees to carry out activities expected to benefit an endangered species that no added federal restrictions will be imposed should the numbers (or occurrence) of the species expand beyond a "baseline" level when the agreement is entered into.

In the spring of that year, the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) was the first species to benefit from a Safe Harbor Agreement. The fledgling program was approved and first developed in the Sandhills region of North Carolina. Since the signing of the first Safe Harbor Agreement between a non-federal landowner and a local office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, at least 62 non-federal landowners with over 36,000 acres have enrolled in the program in the Sandhills of North Carolina. A brief cross-section of the landowners that enrolled in that particular program includes owners of small woodlots, horse farms, golf courses, and non-industrial forest landowners.

Safe Harbor agreements benefiting the red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) have also been approved for Texas, South Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia with current agreements in draft form for Louisiana and Florida. The success of this program in South Carolina is probably best measured from the number of participants coupled with the amount of acreage enrolled. To date, 79 non-federal landowners with over 300,000 acres have enrolled in Safe Harbor in that state alone. Based on this level of participation in just two states,



Photo by Ralph Costa, USFWS

The Safe Harbor program was developed to provide incentives for private landowners so that they can meet their management goals while also managing habitat for endangered species like the red-cockaded woodpecker.

there must be obvious incentives for landowners that are appealing when it comes to an endangered species either occupying or potentially occupying a portion of his/her property.

What about the woodpecker? Why are we at this apparently crucial crossroad when it comes to the existence of this animal?

The RCW is perhaps one of the most noted icons of the open, mature and old growth pine ecosystems of the southeastern United States. The rapid disappearance and retraction of mature, open pine woodlands from incompatible silviculture, conversion to agriculture, development, and sustained fire suppression have resulted in a decline of the RCW to less than 3 percent of its estimated abundance at the time of European settlement. Such a precipitous decline prompted the species' listing as endangered in 1970 and subsequent federal protection with the passage of the ESA.

Contributing to this species' endangerment is its narrow ecological requirements. RCWs are territorial cooperative breeders that live in family "groups" and depend upon extensive tracts of mature, open pine forest where they excavate nesting and roosting cavities in living pine trees. The age of living pines selected for cavity excavation varies, but generally, trees in excess of 60-80 years are selected. RCWs are



Photo by Mark A. Bailey

This open, park-like shortleaf and loblolly pine community could provide the necessary habitat for the red-cockaded woodpecker; however, the longleaf pine is the most commonly used cavity tree in Alabama.



Photo by Mark A. Bailey

This is an example of an active red-cockaded woodpecker cavity in a longleaf pine. Note the resin flowing from sap wells pecked in the tree.

known to excavate cavities in a variety of pines including longleaf (*Pinus palustris*), shortleaf (*P. echinata*), loblolly (*P. taeda*), slash (*P. elliotii*), pond (*P. serotina*), pitch (*P. rigida*), and Virginia pines (*P. virginiana*). However, the most common species used for cavity trees are reportedly longleaf, loblolly, and shortleaf pines, and among these, the longleaf pine is the most commonly used cavity tree in Alabama.

Prior to European settlement, an estimated 60 to 74 million acres were dominated by longleaf pine, which spanned across the uplands of the coastal plains and Piedmont from Virginia to central Florida and west to eastern Texas. Today, approximately 3 percent of the natural longleaf pine forest remains. In Alabama and Georgia, longleaf-dominant stands extended well into mountainous regions where open longleaf pine woodlands occurred extensively on south slopes and ridges just over a century ago. Unfortunately, roughly 5 percent (about 500,000 acres) of Alabama's presettlement 10 million acres of longleaf persist (see Rhett Johnson's Fall 2002 article, "Longleaf Pine: Then and Now"). In several areas of the Southeast, potentially viable RCW populations continue to survive on some relatively large fragments of this remaining habitat. The majority is publicly-owned lands such as military bases, national wildlife refuges, and national forests. Small,



Photo by Mark A. Bailey

A qualified red-cockaded woodpecker biologist can help landowners determine the viability of red-cockaded woodpecker habitat on their property.

isolated, and genetically important RCW groups continue to persist on non-federally owned lands in Alabama that continue to support open, longleaf pine woodlands.

Historically, the RCW was widely distributed in Alabama with reported occurrences from 40 counties. Although the exact number is unknown, it is believed that less than 15 counties continue to support RCWs. The vast majority of the remaining occurrences in Alabama are on National Forest Service lands. The Oakmulgee and Shoal Creek Ranger Districts, Talladega National Forest, and Conecuh National Forest continue to be the front runners for conserving and preserving this species in Alabama. According

to the 2002 11. S. Forest Service RCW census, 120 active groups occurred in the Oakmulgee, followed by 19 in Conecuh and 8 in Shoal Creek Forest Service units. The status of the species on non-federal lands, however, is not as promising. Based on the collective knowledge of wildlife biologists and consulting foresters that have worked on RCW-private landowner issues for years, it is estimated that less than 50

birds occurring in small and isolated populations continue to persist on private land in Alabama.

The Safe Harbor concept is not new to many Alabamians. For nearly a decade, the plight of the RCW and landowner rights and concerns have been debated and considered by biologists, foresters, conservation organizations, state and federal agencies, and private landowners. A Safe Harbor program for the RCW and private landowner has actually been in the works for Alabama since 1995, but an approved, final plan has not been established. A Statewide Safe Harbor Agreement has recently been drafted and will be reviewed shortly by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife and

Freshwater Fisheries, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the plan's RCW Scientific Advisory and Steering Committees. Since the plan has not been approved and finalized, complete details cannot be offered at this time. However, the goals of the Agreement are to provide a "net conservation benefit" to RCW groups by encouraging and facilitating the restoration and enhancement of nesting and foraging habitat on non-federal lands and provide Safe Harbor assurances to non-federal landowners in Alabama.

Landowners in Alabama that will likely benefit from Safe Harbor assurances are those whose property currently supports RCW breeding and/or foraging activity and/or landowners wishing to manage their pinelands in a manner that creates open, park-like conditions with mature pines characterizing the landscape. Properties that are managed under the latter scenario but have no apparent sign of RCW activity (e.g., cavity trees and foraging activity) will greatly benefit in the program, particularly if such property is relatively close to known RCW groups.

The first step a landowner should take is to determine if RCWs are on or in the vicinity of his/her property and if that property contains suitable or potentially suitable breeding and/or foraging habitat for RCWs. Following initial inquiry, a baseline survey will be conducted by a qualified RCW biologist approved by the Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries. A landowner that is interested in the Safe Harbor Program should contact Barry Hart of the Alabama Natural Heritage Program at 334-834-4519 for more information.



Photo by Ralph Costa, USFWS