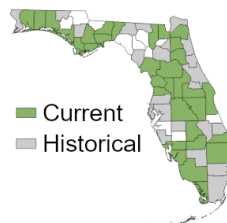


## RED-COCKADED WOODPECKER

*Dryobates borealis*

**Order:** Piciformes  
**Family:** Picidae  
**FNAI Ranks:** G3/S2  
**U.S. Status:** Threatened  
**FL Status:** Threatened



**Description:** This small woodpecker can best be distinguished by the large white cheek patches found on each side of the head and the barred, black and white back. Males and females are difficult to distinguish because the red streaks or “cockades” found on either side of the heads of adult males are rarely visible. Juvenile males, in turn, can be identified by a small, circular patch of red on top of the head that is visible until early fall. The adult male red cockades and juvenile male head patch are both absent in females.

**Similar Species:** No other Florida woodpecker has the large, unbroken white cheek patches as well as the barred “ladder” or “zebra” back. Downy (*Dryobates pubescens*) and hairy (*D. villosus*) woodpeckers are most likely to be confused, but both have a solid white back beneath their wings and a black triangular patch that covers much of the cheek.

**Habitat:** Inhabits open, mature pine woodlands containing a rich diversity of grasses, forbs, and shrubs. Generally occupies longleaf pine flatwoods in north and central Florida, mixed longleaf pine and slash pine in south-central Florida, and slash pine in south Florida outside the range of longleaf pine. Prefers mature pines decidedly but also may use young pines when foraging.

**Seasonal Occurrence:** Nonmigratory and maintains territories throughout the year. They are cooperative breeders where young males often remain with adults for years and assist in raising future offspring. Young females and non-helper males typically disperse a limited distance during their first winter in search of breeding opportunities elsewhere. Territorial groups generally forage over a small area close to nests when nestlings are present but expand the area used after young have fledged in early summer.

**Florida Distribution:** Occurs locally from the western Panhandle through the peninsula to south Florida. Distribution tied to remaining areas of old-growth pine forests. Southernmost occurrence is the Big Cypress National Preserve in Collier and Monroe counties.

**Range-wide Distribution:** Restricted primarily to the Southeastern Coastal Plain from North Carolina to Texas and southern Arkansas. Rangewide, the species has been increasing from 4,694 occupied territories in the early 1990s to 6,105 occupied territories in 2006. Most populations are small and highly fragmented. As of 2006, only Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina (3 of 11 states where the species occurs) harbored populations containing 275-350 active territories. Populations this large are considered to be relatively stable and capable of withstanding threats from storms, inbreeding, diseases, and other perturbations. A total of 128 properties remain within the range of the species, but 73% have fewer than 40 active territories and 90% have fewer than 100 active territories.

**Conservation Status:** Florida has the largest number of active territories in the world. The population was estimated at 1,146 active territories in 1992 and is estimated to be around 2,428 active territories as of 2017; this despite the losses in several counties during that time. The largest concentrations occur on federally managed lands (ca. 74% of active territories) and two of the properties, Apalachicola National Forest and Eglin Air Force Base, harbor greater than 50% of the active territories in the state. State-owned (ca. 24%) and private lands (ca. 2%) support a significant number of smaller populations. Although habitat fragmentation and deficient management of appropriate habitat are concerns, great strides have been made in increasing some populations. Use of artificial cavities and the translocation of subadult birds from large or at-capacity properties to augment small, vulnerable populations are being widely used. Aggressive management, like implementing more frequent prescribed burning, has helped increase populations at many locations. Florida contains 27 regional subunits of territories where each subunit is separated by at least 6 km (3 mi) from other groups of territories. The two largest regional subunits, both located in the Panhandle, are the Apalachicola National Forest (plus adjacent properties), which has ca. 884 active territories, and Eglin Air Force Base, which has 527 active territories. Six of the remaining regional subunits found in Florida contain 50-160 active territories, seven contain 25-50 territories, and 12 subunits, including three on private properties, have fewer than 25 active territories. Almost 80% or 1,929 of the active territories found in Florida are distributed among nine mostly federally-owned properties. In April 2019 the United States Fish and Wildlife Service developed a 3-year workplan to address downlisting and delisting recommendations for 72 species. The red-cockaded woodpecker will be reviewed for downlisting from Federally endangered to threatened or delisted altogether because of recovery.

**Protection and Management:** Federal and state agencies should aggressively manage their extensive tracts of pine forests using a long-term perspective. Habitat quality depends both on the use of frequent fire to maintain open, park-like conditions as well as providing the old trees (90+ years old) preferentially used for cavity excavation. Although labor intensive, clearing around cavity trees and protecting old trees from fire can extend the life of old trees and may be important, especially in small management units. Considerable variation exists in habitat quality throughout Florida, resulting in expanded home range needs in some areas depending on the amount of available habitat. Management should focus both on maintaining the old trees needed for cavity excavation and the mature trees preferentially used when foraging. Within managed areas, higher densities and tighter aggregations of suitable cavity trees have been shown to be extremely important in maintaining or increasing populations. Areas with more fragmented and spatially scattered arrangements of suitable cavity trees are less stable. Installation of artificial cavities and translocation of birds among sites has helped alleviate some of the problems associated with small numbers for populations in the 25-250 active territory range. Maintaining enriched cavity resources as well as concentrated aggregations of cavity resources will help small populations. The value of small populations (i.e., less than 25 territories) should not be overlooked. These populations can be sustained with limited management aimed at maximally aggregating clusters. These populations in turn may help to maintain continuity among larger populations. The value of small populations may be more important when they exist close to other groups, small or large, rather than as isolated fragments. Ideally, management would eventually reduce dependence on artificial cavities if the management unit's pinelands mature and more old pines are made available. Hurricanes present a catastrophic threat to red-cockaded woodpecker populations. The development of artificial cavities occurred in response to hurricane damage and has helped to mitigate the impacts on cavity trees following the aftermath of a destructive storm. The widespread spatial distribution of woodpecker populations across its range is important in ensuring the security and health of the species. Habitat conservation supporting populations, usually small, on private lands is especially important and will help broaden the geographic distribution of populations within Florida and rangewide.

**References:** Cox et al. 1995, Florida Natural Areas Inventory 2019, Greenlaw et al. 2014, Hovis and Labisky 1996, Jackson 1994, McDearman 2018, Stevenson and Anderson 1994, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2006, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2019, Walters et al. 2002.

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