

## Army installations a refuge for struggling woodpecker

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BY Noël Boyne, U.S. Army Environmental Command Public Affairs Officer

Army installations throughout the southeastern United States are playing a critical role in the recovery of the red-cockaded woodpecker, a federally endangered species.

Found in the disappearing longleaf pine forests of the southeastern U.S., the red-cockaded woodpecker is threatened by habitat destruction from deforestation and urban development. Once thriving in 90 million acres of longleaf forests, only one percent of the woodpecker's original population now exists, restricted to the three million acres of long leaf pine forest that remains today.

Since the boundaries of Army installations across the southeast have helped protect that longleaf pine habitat from complete destruction, the red-cockaded woodpecker and other endangered species have found refuge on the training lands and impact areas of nine Army posts.

"We hold much of the last remnant of what southeastern forests once were before urbanization. These installations are islands of biodiversity in a sea of development," says Frank Lands, the Regional Natural Resources Specialist for the Installation Management Command Southeast Region.

"The RCW is the poster child of endangered species for the Army," Lands explained. "The bird is famous for limiting military training, but what we have found is that its forest ecosystem also provides a tremendous training landscape for Soldiers. So, protecting the woodpecker's environment is not incompatible with training, instead, proper natural resource management provides a healthy and realistic training environment."

And now, Army installations and their biologists are helping the rest of the southeast region rebuild that endangered woodpecker population and its habitat because they have been more successful at recovering this endangered species than any federal agency. From 1998 to 2006, Army posts have experienced a 43% increase in active red-cockaded woodpecker clusters. That's 31% higher than the population increase rates of national forests and 14% higher than the rate of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service land holdings.

"It's in our own best interests to help this recovery effort," said Steve Sekscienski, a wildlife biologist with the Army Environmental Command. "As these RCW populations recover and expand, there are less restrictions on our installations operations."

To spread more red-cockaded woodpeckers throughout the southeast landscape, several Army installations participate with private, state and federal partners in a red-cockaded woodpecker translocation program called the Southeast Regional Partnership for Planning and Sustainability, or SERPPAS. Translocation program participants send and receive breeding pairs of woodpeckers each year in order to create multiple satellite populations of red-cockaded woodpeckers in hopes of increasing the birds' population.

The red-cockaded woodpecker translocation program is all about teamwork. SERPPAS brings together multiple federal, state and private entities that support the translocation program through participation or funding. Having Army installations and other entities act as donors



Red-cockaded woodpeckers are protected on multiple Army installations in the Southeast Region. Photo by [Courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#)

and receivers of the red-cockaded woodpecker allows an overall recovery of the species throughout the entire Southeastern U.S. rather than small recoveries in smaller pockets scattered throughout the region.

"The SERPASS provides installation biologists with additional tools that assist installation efforts to recover threatened and endangered species on Army lands," Sekscienski explained. "If it wasn't for the cooperation between federal, state and private landholdings, and especially the hard work of the Army wildlife biologists, it would be impossible to have an impact on the overall recovery of the red-cockaded woodpecker."

Because of the success they've experienced in stabilizing the population of red-cockaded woodpeckers on their installations, Forts Stewart, Benning and Bragg have all become red-cockaded woodpecker donors - sending woodpeckers from their installations to other installations or private and federal landholdings to support population increases. Forts Jackson and Gordon are receiving installations.

At Fort Benning, Ga., biologists have trapped and sent more than one hundred woodpeckers to national parks and forests throughout the southeast U.S. In fact, Benning staff helped restore the RCW population in the wake of Hurricane Katrina by sending nine red-cockaded woodpeckers to the De Soto National Forest in Mississippi.

"Some people wonder why we're 'giving away birds' if we haven't reached our goals yet," said Michael Barron, a wildlife biologist. "Even if we reach our goals at Fort Benning in the future, it doesn't ensure the survival of the species as a whole."

Diversifying the gene pool and reintroducing the red-cockaded woodpeckers to a larger range of suitable habitat outside of Army installations is expected to protect critically small populations of the species in danger of disappearing. A major result of the translocation program is that it will develop a better spatial arrangement of woodpecker groups to reduce isolation on military posts.

"There are non-military properties that have suitable habitat for expansion, but lack populations to expand on their own. Translocation is the premier management tool to quicken the pace of expansion and, thereby, accelerate overall recovery of the species," explained Lands. "The collaboration between our Army installations and other outside organizations will prove to be the key to the success of red-cockaded woodpecker conservation."

Private and federal landholdings, and five states (Alabama, Georgia, Florida and the Carolinas) participate in SERPPAS. This year, the Department of Defense gave SERPPAS a \$700,000 grant to fund the translocation program. Because the program is so vital to the recovery of the red-cockaded woodpecker, all five SERPPAS states have committed to picking up the program's tab next year.

The Army's recovery plan for the red-cockaded woodpecker is fourfold: increase habitat management, regenerate longleaf forests, translocation and woodpecker monitoring. The effect the SERPPAS translocation program will have on the red-cockaded woodpecker is projected to result in a complete regional recovery of the species. The translocation program and the recovery rates that will result from it are proof of the Army's commitment to the welfare of the threatened species that share its lands. The Army hopes that its efforts to repopulate and protect the red-cockaded woodpecker will result in the delisting of the endangered bird by the year 2075.

*The U.S. Army Environmental Command is the Army's point organization for supporting the implementation of environmental programs that facilitate sustainable Army training and operations while protecting the environment. We provide environmental program management and technical support products and services in support of Army training operations, acquisition and sound stewardship.*

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