

Spectrum

Endangered woodpeckers released

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Before daybreak Nov. 7 teams were out in the woods near Lake Whittemore making matches.

"If all goes well, we will have some new families in this area," Steven Camp whispered to no one in particular as he scanned the trees towering over him.

The old growth pines had been specially prepared to house endangered Red-cockaded woodpeckers.

Despite having driven most of the night from Fort Bragg, N.C., where he had traveled to capture young woodpeckers, Camp, Fort Gordon Fish and Wildlife biologist, moved about with missionary zeal.

Standing in a grove of trees rising high into the star speckled sky with Robert Drumm, Natural Resources Branch chief and Steve Willard, Directorate of Public Works Environmental Division chief, Camp recounted the massive work on-going to revitalize the endangered Red-cockaded woodpecker population on Fort Gordon.

"This is a huge collaborative effort that includes help from DPW [Directorate of Public Works], DPTMS [Directorate of Plans, Training, Mobilization and Security] and is sanctioned by F&WL (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service).

The current operation that drew three teams to the area surrounding Whittemore Lake on this cold fall morning was designed to release three breeding pairs of 6-month-old woodpeckers into areas that had been prepared for them.

The U.S. F&WL Service is the federal agency taking the lead on the recovery effort for this endangered species.

According to information from the F&WL Service, the endangered Red-cockaded woodpecker is about eight inches long with a wing span of about 12 inches. There are black and white horizontal stripes on its back, and its cheeks and underparts are white. Its flanks are black streaked. The cap and stripe on the side of the neck and the throat are black. The male has a small red spot on each side of the black cap. After the first post fledgling molt, fledgling males have a red crown patch. This woodpecker's diet is composed mainly of insects which include ants, beetles, wood-boring insects, caterpillars, and corn ear worms if available. About 16 to 18 percent of the diet includes seasonal wild fruit.

Egg laying occurs during April, May, and June with the female utilizing her mate's roosting cavity for a nest. Maximum clutch size is seven eggs with the average being three to five eggs. From egg laying to fledging requires about 38 days, and then another



Photos by Larry Edmond

(Above, left to right) In the pre-dawn dark Steve Camp, Fort Gordon Fish and Wildlife biologist, Steve Willard, Directorate of Public Works Environmental Division chief, and Robert Drumm, Natural Resources Branch chief stand in a cluster of trees prepared to house a new family of endangered Red-cockaded woodpeckers, Nov. 7 on Fort Gordon. The nesting trees are marked with light reflecting double bands.

several weeks are needed before the young become completely independent. Most often, the parent birds and some of their male offspring from previous years form a family unit called a group. A group may include one breeding pair and as many as seven other birds. Commonly, these groups are comprised of three to five birds. Rearing the young birds becomes a shared responsibility of the group. However, a single pair can breed successfully without the benefit of the helpers.

This bird's range is closely tied to the distribution of southern pines. Historically, the red-cockaded woodpecker occurred from East Texas and Oklahoma, to Florida, and North to New Jersey.

For nesting/roosting habitat, open stands of pine containing trees 60 years old and older. Red-cockaded woodpeckers need live, large older pines in which to excavate their cavities. Longleaf pines (*Pinus palustris*) are most commonly used, but other species of southern pine are also acceptable. Dense stands (stands that are primarily hardwoods, or that have a dense hardwood understory) are avoided. Foraging habitat is provided in pine and pine hardwood stands 30 years old or older with foraging preference for pine trees 10 inches or larger in diameter. In good, moderately-stocked, pine habitat, sufficient foraging substrate can be provided on 80 to 125 acres.

Public lands like Fort Gordon and other military installations in the south provide a perfect location to manage the recovery of the birds.

On Fort Gordon, Camp said the areas around the lakes have old growth trees. He pointed out trees which he said are 90-100 years old.

"Presently we have prepared 12 sites where we have clusters of trees for breeding groups," he said. To prepare a site the biologists coordinate with timber sales to clear the open stands that Red-cockaded woodpeckers like. Then the ar-

reas must be in low impact training areas.

"We certainly don't want to be near where there might be heavy traffic or weapons training evolutions," Camp said.

The cluster of trees supporting each breeding pair are no closer than a quarter of a mile to give the birds adequate foraging territory. To further help the birds the biologists constructed cavities in the trees. The goal is to eventually have 30 clusters or sites prepared for breeding pairs.

In the middle of the night as soon as they returned from Fort Bragg, Camp and his team of wildlife biologist had placed a male in one cavity and a female in a tree in the same area. The cavities were covered over with a screen to keep the birds inside until they could be released at the same time.

The idea, Camp said is to wait until daylight when they normally begin foraging and release both birds at the same time with the hope that they will join up. "This is match making in the forest," he said.

As the sun began to break above the tree line and the temperature rose, one of the birds began pecking at the barrier holding it in its cavity nest.

Camp instructed the two men paused beside their strings to wait until the second bird was awake and pecking.

The early rising bird pecked incessantly. His potential mate still lay dormant.

Minutes passed as the early-rising bird pecked louder, harder. Nothing was heard from bird two.

Drumm rubbed a stick against the tree trunk to rouse the bird. Suddenly a faint tapping began in the second tree.

Camp called out to pull the barriers back. As the screens dropped from the tree cavities bird one shot out of the tree chattering loudly. A few seconds later, bird two emerged.

The two birds immediately flew toward the same tree and settled on a limb chattering and calling to one another like old friends.

Camp pointed at the duo and smiled.



Courtesy photo

(Above) A mature Red-Cockaded woodpecker is tagged so wildlife biologists can track the bird.



(Above) Robert Drumm, Natural Resources Branch chief prepares to release a Red-cockaded woodpecker from the cavity that the team built into a tree on Fort Gordon. (Below) the trio of naturalists follow the flight of the two birds they released on the fort Nov. 7.



(Above) Steve Willard, Directorate of Public Works Environmental Division chief, stands prepared to release a Red-cockaded woodpecker at the same time as another biologist releases the bird's potential mate from the nests where biologists placed the birds. (Below left) Robert Drumm, Natural Resources Branch chief and Steve Camp, Fort Gordon Fish and Wildlife biologist pack up their capture gear after releasing the new birds onto Fort Gordon.



Courtesy photo

A mature Red-cockaded woodpecker enters its cavity nest.

