

Hitchcock Woods Restoration

The Return of Red-Cockaded Woodpeckers

BY PAM GLEASON

If you ride in the Hitchcock Woods this spring, you might hear a sound that hasn't been heard there for about half a century. This would be the call of red-cockaded woodpeckers chirping out warnings, announcing the fact that they have returned to their roosting sites, or communicating with companions while foraging for food. The Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology describes these three different calls as a "raspy 'skilt'" (when they are disturbed), a "chut" (when they are returning to the roosting area,) and a "soft melodious chortling" when they are foraging close to one another. Although red-cockaded woodpeckers once inhabited the Woods,

the Woods. "You will probably hear them easier than you will see them."

What is so special about red-cockaded woodpeckers? Once common in the Southeast, they were declared an endangered species back in the 1970s, and it is only because of the dedication of many different groups of environmentalists and bird lovers that they have survived into this century. In November 2017, the Hitchcock Woods Foundation joined the preservation effort when ten birds (often called RCWs) were brought to the Woods and released in five separate recruitment clusters, which are areas with



they disappeared in the 1960s and had not been seen there for decades. They are back now.

"They are very vocal and social birds," says Randy Wolcott, a member of the Hitchcock Woods Foundation board of trustees. Randy, who had heard about red-cockaded woodpeckers about 20 years ago, was the driving force behind re-introducing them to

suitable habitat for nesting and foraging.

If you do happen to hear RCWs calling to one another while you are in the Woods, look for a black and white bird about the size of a cardinal. Despite their name, the birds have very little red on them: their most obvious feature is a bold patch of white on their cheeks and a distinctive black cap. Males have a very small, ribbon-

like streak of red that runs along the bottom of this cap. Without a pair of binoculars, you probably won't see it. Binoculars might also help you distinguish the endangered RCW from the other, more common species of woodpecker that inhabit the woods, including the red bellied woodpecker, the downy woodpecker, the red-headed woodpecker and the much larger pileated woodpecker.

RCWs are specifically adapted to the longleaf pine ecosystem. They live in small groups, usually a breeding pair with one to four "helpers," typically young male offspring from previous years. Highly territorial and non-migratory, they are known as cooperative breeders: all of the birds in a group work together to care for the breeding pair's brood and to maintain cavity trees where they make their nests. Each group actively patrols its home range, an area of approximately 125 acres of forest. They must vigilantly defend their nests from "floaters" (individuals RCWs out searching for vacant nests), and other cavity nesters such as blue birds, flying squirrels, and other woodpeckers.

A main factor in saving the RCW has been the restoration of longleaf pine forests, which once covered some 90 million acres from Virginia to Florida. These are woods characterized by tall pines that shade a carpet of wiregrass with very little underbrush. It is an ecosystem that is shaped by fire: for hundreds of years, longleaf forests experienced frequent fires ignited by lightning. Longleaf pines themselves adapted to this, gaining fire resistant trunks and even relying on high temperatures to help their seeds germinate.

The Hitchcock Woods was originally a traditional longleaf forest, but by the 1970s and 1980s, its character had changed: without much in the way of fire, there was too much undergrowth and there were many other species of trees that competed with the pines. This was why the RCWs disappeared: the habitat was no longer suitable for them.

The Hitchcock Woods Foundation started a program of controlled burns in the early 1990s, mostly to clear out years of pine straw and reduce the chances of a catastrophic forest fire that might endanger surrounding neighborhoods. In the mid-1990s, these controlled burns became more scientific after the foundation enlisted the help of biologists from North Carolina to come up with an ecological plan and a prescription to turn the woods back into a traditional longleaf forest. Today, after about 20 years of scientific burning, thinning and other management practices, much of the longleaf ecosystem has been restored.

Once the habitat was again appropriate for red-cockaded woodpeckers, Randy Wolcott wondered if they might return on their own. He was told probably not: although there are RCW populations in several South Carolina forests, the birds do not tend to travel very far from where they are born, and there is so much development around the Woods that there is no convenient, natural corridor to lead them there.

However, a few years ago he learned that it might be possible to have some relocated to the Woods. It was very complicated: RCWs are a federally protected species, so you can't just net them and bring them in. There needed to be a red-cockaded woodpecker management plan created by an RCW biologist. Suitable trees needed to be found for nesting, surrounded by areas that would provide adequate foraging. Then the Hitchcock Woods Foundation needed permission from the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife, and it needed to jump through several regulatory hoops in order to avoid the potential negative consequences of the "incidental take" (any activity that may cause harm to the RCW, cavity trees, and foraging habitat) of a federally endangered species.

Finally, the birds needed somewhere to live. Most woodpeckers make their homes in dead trees, but RCWs excavate nesting cavities in the heartwood of large living pines. A tree needs to be about 80 years old to be a suitable size, and it can take the

birds from one to six years to create a cavity. Each breeding pair and their helpers work together to maintain several cavity trees so every individual has somewhere to sleep at night. In natural circumstances, it obviously takes a pretty long time for a breeding pair to become established as a new group and start laying eggs.

Fortunately, it turns out that RCWs are very happy with artificial cavity boxes. These are hollowed out blocks of cedar with a reinforced, restricted opening just large enough for a red-cockaded woodpecker. The boxes are installed high up in the hearts of large trees and disguised to look like the real thing. When RCWs come across them, they move in quite readily. And so, with the help of a grant from the Longleaf Alliance, a nonprofit based in Alabama, the Hitchcock Woods Foundation obtained 36 of these nesting boxes, which they had installed in nine designated areas. Then they were ready for some birds.

"It took a long time to get everything in place, but then all the stars aligned and it happened very quickly," says Randy. In October of 2016, the foundation was offered 10 birds from the Francis Marion National Forest north of Charleston through a cooperative agreement between state and federal agencies along with various wildlife consultants. Not only would they get 10 birds in 2016, they were promised as many as 10 birds a year for the next four years. They accepted the offer, and in November, a group joined a team of RCW biologists at Francis Marion, netted five pairs of year-old woodpeckers, and brought them back to the Woods. That evening, they took each bird up a tree and shut it in a cavity for the night. In the morning, when the birds were awake, they opened the doors to the cavities and the birds emerged and flew out.

"And then they were here," says Randy. Four months later, Mark Pavlosky Jr., a RCW biologist with MPJ Wildlife Consulting, LLC based in Aiken, who has been working with the foundation since 2014 to create the Hitchcock Woods red-cockaded woodpecker plan, had some good news. He did a survey that found that at least seven of the 10 birds are still in the Woods. If all goes well, they will start breeding and the first RCW eggs will hatch in mid-May.

"It's very exciting," says Randy. "It is the capstone on our forest management practices. If the woodpeckers come back, it proves that what we have been doing to manage the forest has been the right thing. Our work is allowing us to bring in this endangered species and give it back the home that it always had here. It's a fabulous thing that it has all come together."

What does all this mean for people who enjoy riding and walking in the woods? Are there any new restrictions, or any plans to feature the birds on nature walks or things of that type? For the moment, no. The RCW nesting boxes were placed in trees that are off the trails, and the HWF has always asked that riders and walkers stay on the trails, so they are unlikely to disturb the birds if they follow the rules. While the RCW population is getting established, the foundation is not publicizing the whereabouts of the nesting trees in order to give the birds some privacy, though it is possible that small groups might be invited to come observe them later on.

If the RCW population re-establishes itself in the Woods, this will mean that the Hitchcock Woods Foundation's efforts Woods have returned the forest to a natural, healthy state. Preserving and protecting the Woods has been a fantastic thing for Aiken and for the people who enjoy its trails and tranquility. It has also been a boon for the environment and a blessing for a sociable black and white bird on its way back from the brink of extinction. 

Do you want to help the Hitchcock Woods Foundation care for its RCW population? It costs approximately \$10,000 per year to manage the birds. You can make a donation to the Woods, and even designate your contribution to go to RCW restoration if you so desire. www.hitchcockwoods.org.