

Reclassification of the Iconic Red-Cockaded Woodpecker



The Power of Partnerships Prevailing

A Vanishing Species

The pre-settlement landscape of open longleaf and other pine forests of the southeast is estimated to have once covered more than 247 million acres and potentially supported 1.5 million or more red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) breeding groups or clusters. Extensive cutting of these forests throughout the early 1900s, followed by habitat conversion, fire suppression, and a host of other factors, led to the well-documented decline of this iconic species. By the time RCWs received protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1973, it was estimated that there were no more than 4,000 active clusters, and the bird's preferred habitat had dwindled to less than 3 million acres.

In Recovery Mode

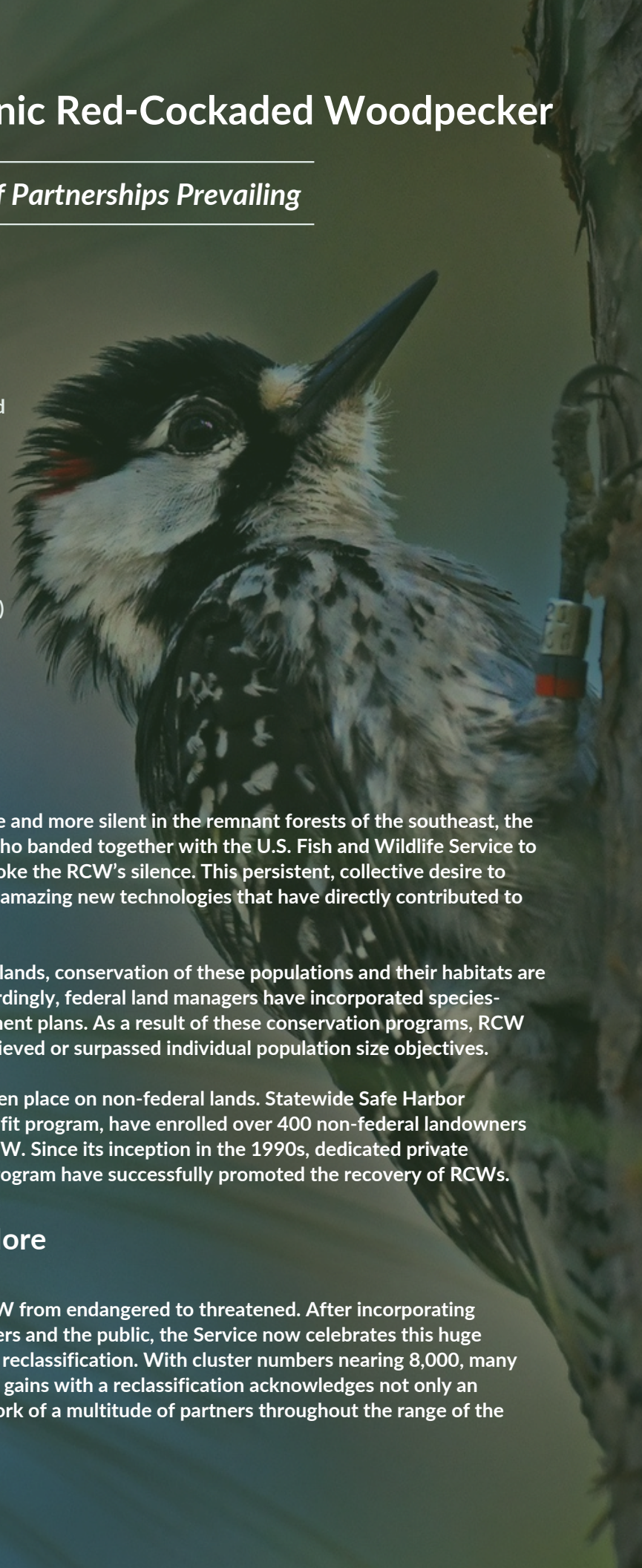
As the characteristic calls of the RCW became more and more silent in the remnant forests of the southeast, the drive and determination of partners near and far, who banded together with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to bring this bird back from the brink of extinction, broke the RCW's silence. This persistent, collective desire to recover the RCW inspired unique partnerships and amazing new technologies that have directly contributed to improvements in the species' status.

With a vast majority of RCWs occurring on federal lands, conservation of these populations and their habitats are key to continued successful recovery efforts. Accordingly, federal land managers have incorporated species-specific conservation strategies into their management plans. As a result of these conservation programs, RCW populations have increased, and in some cases, achieved or surpassed individual population size objectives.

Critically important conservation work has also taken place on non-federal lands. Statewide Safe Harbor Agreements, now known as the Conservation Benefit program, have enrolled over 400 non-federal landowners covering approximately 2.5 million acres for the RCW. Since its inception in the 1990s, dedicated private landowners enrolled in the Conservation Benefit program have successfully promoted the recovery of RCWs.

Threatened With Extinction No More

In 2020, the Service proposed reclassifying the RCW from endangered to threatened. After incorporating several years' worth of information from our partners and the public, the Service now celebrates this huge step in the recovery of the species by finalizing the reclassification. With cluster numbers nearing 8,000, many populations are stable or increasing. Marking these gains with a reclassification acknowledges not only an improvement in the bird's status but the intense work of a multitude of partners throughout the range of the species to move the needle on conservation.



Tailoring Future Conservation Needs

In addition to reclassifying RCWs from endangered to threatened, the Service has also crafted a species-specific 4(d) rule for the RCW. For threatened species, the Service uses the flexibility provided under section 4(d) of the ESA to tailor “take” prohibitions for species’ conservation. This targeted approach helps reduce regulatory burdens by excepting certain activities that do not significantly harm the species.

The RCW 4(d) rule continues to prohibit take, among other standard activities (e.g., import/export). The prohibitions apply throughout the species’ range, on both public and private lands.

In addition to these prohibitions, several exceptions were included to allow for routine law enforcement activities, defense of life, aiding sick or injured birds, and to encourage the active habitat management this species uniquely requires. Specifically, the 4(d) rule:

- Excepts take associated with activities that are authorized by permits under the ESA, including those associated with Conservation Benefit Agreements or Habitat Conservation Plans.
- Allows employees of State conservation agencies operating under a cooperative agreement with the Service to take RCWs in carrying out RCW conservation programs.
- Provides species-specific exceptions to the standard take prohibitions in the rule to facilitate the continuation or implementation of beneficial management practices that provide for conservation of the species.
 - The 4(d) rule allows incidental take on Department of Defense installations that occurs as a result of implementing habitat management and military training activities within a Service-approved Integrated Natural Resource Management Plans.
 - It allows incidental take that results from habitat management activities intended to restore or maintain RCW habitat on federal land management agency properties as detailed within a federal habitat management plan which incorporates measures that reduce effects on the species.
 - It includes a provision that would except take resulting from prescribed burns or the use of herbicides on private lands, when compatible with maintaining any known RCW populations, as long as landowners follow best management practices and minimize adverse effects to known active clusters, to the maximum extent practicable.
 - It also excepts incidental take that occurs as a result of the installation, maintenance, and replacement of artificial cavities by proficiently trained individuals following appropriate guidelines.

**For more information
regarding RCW recovery,
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