

Red-headed Woodpecker (RHWO) Recovery

Best Management Practice for Public Landmanagers

Identification: Male and Female: Bright red head and neck; white breast, belly, rump, and vent; black back, tail, and wings with prominent white secondaries visible in flight and at rest. Juvenile: Mottled brown head and neck; white breast, belly, and rump variably marked with brown streaking; dark brown back and upperwings; white secondaries are broken by brown lateral bars; tail is dark brown.

- Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Conservation Status - This species is of high conservation concern, primarily because of precipitous population declines nearly throughout its range. Overall, a 50 % loss has been noted rangewide since 1966. Reasons for this decline are not clear, and understanding this species' precise habitat relationships and sensitivity to silvicultural and other land-use practices will be important for conserving future populations.

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RHWO Conservation Needs

Food – Diet: A wide variety of food items has been documented, including wood-boring and flying insects, fruit, corn, eggs and nestlings of small birds (e.g. Purple Martins and bluebirds), small vertebrates (e.g. mice), seeds; may be attracted to a backyard with suet, sunflower seeds, cracked corn, and bread. **Foraging Strategy:** An opportunistic forager, often seen on tree trunks and major limbs, but less likely to drill for food than other woodpeckers. Flies out from a perch to catch insects in the air or on ground; also gleans insects from bark and foliage. Gathers acorns, beechnuts, and other nuts in fall, stores them in holes and crevices, and then feeds on them during winter.

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Breeding Habitat - Open woodland, especially with beech or oak, and open situations with scattered trees, e.g. parks, cultivated areas, gardens, groves, farm country, orchards, and shade trees in towns. Generally avoids unbroken forest, favoring open country or at least clearings in the woods. Also found in pine-savannah, pine-oak barrens, forested wetlands or flooded timber, and timber stands treated with herbicides or burns.

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Nesting – Nest Site: The nest cavity is usually in a bare dead tree or limb. The male's winter roosting cavity may be used, or a new cavity may be excavated; both adults excavate (mostly the male), the female usually inspects the nest cavity. **Height:** Ranges from near ground level to over 100 feet (30 meters). **Nest:** No nest construction other than wood chips left in the bottom of the cavity.

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Migratory Information – RHWO are short range migrants. There also are some that do not migrate. They formerly migrated in any direction toward abundant beechnut mast (a favorite food). In the spring, they migrate between March and May and are probably nocturnal migrants. In the fall, they migrate between August and November and are probably diurnal migrants, suggesting they look for hard mast.

Management Recommendations - Whether a Park, Nature Center or Wildlife Refuge, you may manage a piece of land that can be used by Red-Headed Woodpeckers (RHWO). One key to RHWO recovery is the presence of large dead trees, or dead tree limbs, and a source of mast food (nuts or acorns). If you have large dead trees on your land, keep them. If live trees have large dead limbs, retain them.

Ideal Red-Headed Woodpecker habitat includes:

- Large trees. These may be hardwoods, like oak, and/or softer woods, like aspen or pines. RHWO are very opportunistic.
- A savannah-like low density of trees. Large city lots, old farm land, shelterbelts and pastures are ideal.
- An open understory.
- Good number of mast trees, producing nuts and acorns, like oaks, hickory or beech. While RHWO eat insects in the warmer months, these nut trees will help them through the colder months.
- Good availability of large dead trees or trees with large dead limbs. RHWO need multiple cavities for nesting, roosting and food storage.

Large dead or dying trees are an essential component of Red-headed Woodpecker habitat. We call these wildlife trees or snags. These trees provide foraging, shelter and nesting sites. In modern times, we have been taught to remove all dying trees as soon as possible. Any tree in decline is suspect, and any dead tree is removed immediately. The RHWO has paid the price. The recovery of RHWO calls for a more measured approach. If it's safe to leave a wildlife tree up for a few years, consider doing so.

The best overall RHWO habitat is an open savannah type, with scattered clusters of dead and live trees that include mast, i.e. nuts or acorns. A low understory is also beneficial as Red-headed Woodpeckers secure additional food by fly-catching insects. They like to swoop down from a perch to grab insects, and a low understory helps this foraging behavior.

Urban/Suburban Parks

Safety is always a concern. Heavily wooded parks should retain any large dead trees that are in low use or restricted areas. Small trees and shrubs should be removed providing an open understory in or adjacent to these areas. Try to plan long term. Large dead snags do not last forever. If several live trees are present you might consider girdling a large mature tree that has large limbs. In addition to girdling an entire tree, a couple of large limbs (lowermost) on a living tree could be girdled and most of the outer limb removed leaving a few feet of dead limb for cavity building. Red-headed Woodpeckers seem to have a preference for nesting in the limbs of trees. If there is a lack of suitable wildlife trees, erect untreated telephone poles. Also plant mast trees appropriate to the region.

Nature Centers and Wildlife Refuges

Research the area to determine the land type it was in the past. If it was a savanna, work to restore the savanna. Retain all large dead trees. All shrubs and small trees should be removed within a few acres of the dead trees. If at all practical the understory should be burned. Successful habitat creation at Necedah NWR in Wisconsin demonstrated that RHWO respond very positively to savanna habitat that has been burned. If there are no dead trees, girdle a couple of large (preferably softwood) trees near each other. In addition to girdling an entire tree, a couple of large limbs (lowermost) on a living tree could be girdled and most of the outer limb removed leaving a few feet of dead limb for cavity building. If there are no mast (nut/acorn) trees present, plant some that are appropriate to your region.

Keep a positive attitude. Red-headed Woodpeckers can respond within a year or two to suitable habitat.

- **Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery**
(www.RedheadRecovery.org)