

Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery

The red-headed woodpecker (RHWO) is one of our most attractive, lively, and colorful birds, and a special joy when we find one along a country road. Both male and female are similarly, and dramatically, patterned with crimson heads, white breasts, and solid blocks of black and white on their backs and wings.

Red-headed woodpeckers are habitat specialists that require a savannah-type landscape, characterized by a large open understory and small clusters of mature trees. The open understory facilitates the bird's habit of swooping down from a high perch to capture beetles, grasshoppers, and other insects during spring and summer months. A few mature trees that produce beech nuts or oak acorns provide necessary food for fall and winter months. But the real key to good RHWO habitat is the presence of large dead trees, or 'snags,' with large limbs to accommodate cavities for nesting, roosting, and food-caching activities.



Formerly common across its historic range, red-headed woodpeckers have experienced dramatic regional declines from between 40 to 80% over the past forty years. Both the National Audubon Society and the American Bird Conservancy include RHWO as a species on their "watch lists" of special concern. In the eastern U. S. a number of states list the red-headed woodpecker as "threatened" and even "endangered." In the Midwest RHWO numbers have declined close to 50% during the past forty years.

Not surprisingly, habitat preservation and creation are keys to successful recovery efforts. Rich King, staff biologist at Necedah NWR in Wisconsin, has created an oak savannah project that demonstrates if you build good habitat "they will come." In a 2000-acre oak savannah project, King now has over 70 nesting RHWO pairs. Similar efforts at restoring oak savannah habitat at the Cedar Creek Eco Systems Science Reserve in east central Minnesota have produced exciting results. The highest concentration of RHWO in the entire state can be found in 800 acres of oak savannah, with snags present. Clearly habitat restoration and creation works.

What you can do

There are many ways public and private landowners can contribute. From a bird's-eye view, golf courses, cemeteries, park lands and even suburban landscapes can replicate the Red-Head's requirement for savannah. A study of golf courses in Ohio revealed that a number were already providing good habitat for RHWO. Similarly, small farmsteads and open rural land can provide good RHWO habitat. Once again, the key is the presence of snags, or what naturalists call "wildlife trees."

Private landowners can make a big difference. Oak savannah is one of the most critically imperiled upland habitat types in the world. If you have oak savannah on your land, consider managing it with brush cutting and/or controlled fire (get professional assistance when burning), to improve habitat not only for red-headed woodpeckers, but the many additional rare and endangered plants and animals that depend on this dwindling habitat.

Another key part of RHWO recovery involves public education by simply encouraging the preservation of dead snags. Generally, our culture equates dead trees with worthless, or dangerous, trees. However, dead snags, or wildlife trees, provide nesting and feeding opportunities for many birds and small mammals. Woodpeckers may excavate the original

cavities, but when they abandon them, squirrels, mice, screech owls and other birds who are incapable of digging their own holes quickly move in. These new residents enhance the biodiversity of the area which strengthens the overall ecosystem.

Whenever possible landowners and managers should retain a few dead trees as nesting areas for woodpeckers. Of course, elms with Dutch elm disease should be removed entirely, but a few dead trees of other species should be retained. To relieve the problem of dead snags blowing over and becoming a hazard, the majority of the small limbs at the top of the tree can be lopped off, leaving the main trunk and some of the larger limbs. RHWO actually seem to prefer nesting in limbs rather than the main trunk, so be sure to leave some major limb segments.

For more information

For more information regarding Red-Headed Woodpecker populations around Minnesota, technical references and our [Best Management Practices](#) for the species, please see our website: www.redheadrecovery.org.

Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery is a project of the Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis, in cooperation with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Non-Game Division and the University of Minnesota's Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve.



"Help bring this wonderful bird
back to our countryside. And,
spare that snag!"

"When a dead tree falls, the woodpeckers share in its death"
Malayan Proverb