Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery
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www.RedheadRecovery.org

Golf Courses
Best Management Practice

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.

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. Listed as "Near Threatened" by International Union for Conservation of Nature, IUCN.

- Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Red-headed Woodpecker (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 berries, acorns, and other nuts in fall, stores them in holes and crevices, and then feeds on them during winter.

- Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Breeding Habitat - Open oak savanna or woodland, especially with 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-savanna, pine-oak barrens, forested wetlands or flooded timber, and timber stands treated with herbicides or burns.

- Minnesota DNR & Cornell Lab of Ornithology

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.

- Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Migratory Information – RHWO are short range migrants. There are some that do not migrate. They formally migrated in a southerly 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 - As a golf course manager, 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 trees on your course, 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 especially like mast trees and they should be the predominate trees planted.
- A savanna-like low density of trees. Golf courses provide an ideal habitat since they replicate many features of a savanna-type environment.
- An open understory – Removal of invasive species like buckthorn and honeysuckle is very important.
- 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 savanna type (www.savannaoak.org is an excellent reference on oak savannas), with scattered clusters of dead and live trees that include mast, i.e. nuts or acorns. Because oak savannas were converted to agriculture, overgrazed, developed, or fire deprived, an oak savanna is one of the most imperiled ecosystem in the country. 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.

Golf Course – All large dead trees should be retained where practical and don't pose a safety hazard. Where falling limbs represent a minor safety hazard, trim off all the limbs except the largest 4 – 6, which should be cut off about 3 - 5 feet from the trunk. If there are many large trees and no large dead trees, girdle a couple within 50 feet of one another in an area where they will not pose a safety hazard. Try to plan long term. Large dead snags do not last forever. 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. Small trees and shrubs within 50 feet of the dead trees should be removed and the area burned if practical. Successful habitat creation at Necedah NWR in Wisconsin demonstrated that RHWO respond very positively to savanna habitat that has been burned. Managers should highlight their efforts to restore plant communities to the public.

On courses with few trees or the manager is unwilling to kill any trees, erect a couple of untreated wooded telephone poles within fifty feet of each other. Experiment with putting "limbs" about 6 inches in diameter on the poles.

Use of pesticides should be very limited within 300 feet of potential RHWO habitat, since they often forage in turf and feed extensively on insects.

Keep a positive attitude. Red-headed Woodpeckers can respond within a year or two to suitable habitat. They are also very visible and will enhance a golfer's experience.