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Memo:Graphic "Red-cockaded woodpecker" not in database; please see microfilm.

SOME BRAGGING, OTHERS BOILING OVER BIRDS

WOODPECKERS THRIVE ON BASE, DRIVE TOWN BATTY
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Top environmental leaders gathered Wednesday, amid the roar of cargo planes and thud of artillery, to celebrate an endangered-species success story at the most unlikely of places.

Along with Army paratroopers, Fort Bragg grows platoons of **red-cockaded woodpeckers**. The nation's second-largest population of the endangered bird thrives among its 120,000 acres of longleaf pine forests.

In reaching a bird recovery goal five years early, Bragg netted a rare victory for the Endangered Species Act. But a little town 90 miles to the southeast is learning why it's also the nation's most feared environmental law.

Woodpeckers are driving folks in Boiling Spring Lakes nuts.

Wariness of legal protections for the birds have stopped development cold. Two property owners have been told they can't build on their lots. Some predict trees will be mowed down just to keep **woodpeckers** away.

"I don't know where it all stems from," said real estate agent Joyce Warner, who said she's already lost a sale over the bird. "All I know is it's wreaking havoc on us now."

Congress has used such stories to try to rewrite - or gut, environmentalists say - the landmark 1973 law, which protects 1,200 rare plant and animal species. A House bill passed last year would force the government to compensate property owners if species protection thwarts development. Measures are circulating in the Senate.

"I don't think any of us believe the Endangered Species Act couldn't be improved," Dale Hall, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said Wednesday at Bragg. He said collaboration,

especially with private landowners, works better than fines.

Bragg wasn't thrilled to protect its **woodpeckers** either, until Fish and Wildlife forced its hand in 1990. Now the post is a national model for military conservation with the **woodpecker** its emblem of success.

In 1992, the base counted 238 **woodpecker** breeding groups. Last year, there were 347. Despite that success, biologists say the species is decades away from recovery throughout its range from the Carolinas to Texas.

"The long-term objective is to make the **red-cockaded woodpecker** like a deer or a rabbit, where our soldiers can train in a realistic manner," said Col. Al Aycock, garrison commander.

Years ago, he said, soldiers couldn't walk within 200 feet of the pines painted with two white stripes that flag **woodpecker** nest trees. Biologists eventually learned that the birds got used to foot traffic. Some of the cardinal-sized birds aren't even rattled by the rifle ranges near their nest.

"It's a very persistent species or they wouldn't be here," said Jackie Britcher, Bragg's endangered-species chief.

Bragg expects some training restrictions to be lifted because it has reached the **woodpecker's** recovery goal.

Because its forests aren't logged, the fort holds the state's largest remaining reservoir of longleaf, an ancient pine the **woodpeckers** favor for pecking out nest cavities. Longleaf, which once covered 93 million acres in the Southeast, has been reduced to 3 percent of its range.

Bragg burns 40,000 acres of its forests a year with low-intensity blazes that kill alien plants and provide seed beds for pines.

Staff biologists encouraged the **woodpeckers** by providing ready-made homes. They use chain saws to carve into the pines, then insert nest boxes that look like the real thing.

"We can do in 30 minutes what can take them a year, three years, five years," said Ralph Costa, the federal biologist in charge of the bird's recovery.

The post also worked with Fish and Wildlife, state agencies and land trusts to protect more than 12,000 acres outside its boundaries across the rolling, piney Sandhills region. The land serves as **woodpecker** habitat and buffers Bragg from encroaching development.

Boiling Spring Lakes, a town of 4,000 known for its numerous lakes, is now gaining a reputation for its 20 clusters of **red-cockaded woodpeckers**.

The bedroom community near the coastal city of Southport, in the state's southeastern corner, is lush with longleaf and wetlands. As development boomed, biologists took note of the sap-dripping holes in many of the pines: **woodpecker** homes.

Federal officials came calling last fall, later printing a map of habitat to protect. The town, which could be held responsible for dead birds, now won't issue building permits in those areas without federal approval.

Developers quickly vanished, said City Manager David Lewis.

"It's dropped to near zero, the construction out here," he said, adding that the birds have nested next to existing homes for years. "Homes are being completed, but new construction has ground to a near halt."

Lot owners could file plans that outline how they would protect their habitat, or compensate if birds are harmed. But it would be faster and cheaper, the wildlife agency says, for the town itself to file a single plan.

The town has declined to spend taxpayer money - estimated at up to \$100,000 of its \$2 million budget - on bird habitat it doesn't own, Lewis said.

The town has more options than simply building or not building, said Fish and Wildlife spokeswoman Patty Matteson, and isn't under any federal order. But, she added, "we know we're stopping (building) plans in some cases.

"We're not picking on Boiling Spring Lakes. They just have great habitat down there."

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Illustration:GRAPHIC:1 PHOTO:1

1. AP FILE PHOTO. **Red-cockaded woodpecker**

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