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## Woodpecker population recovers on Fort Bragg

Section: Local & State  
Henry Cuningham

By Henry Cuningham

Military editor

Army, federal and environmental officials Wednesday celebrated the recovery of the endangered **red-cockaded woodpecker** on Fort Bragg, paving the way for possible easing of training restrictions.

In recent years, Fort Bragg has restricted training, drilled artificial cavities for roosting and nesting and accelerated burning of undergrowth to provide a conducive habitat for the bird, known to soldiers as the RCW.

Officials from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Nature Conservancy joined post officials Wednesday to celebrate the recovery of the woodpecker population five years ahead of schedule.

"To me, this is what success under the Endangered Species Act is all about," said Dale Hall, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"Fort Bragg has set a standard here that is really being followed across the country and at other military installations."

The event took place under longleaf pine trees, the woodpecker's habitat, at the pavilion at McKellar's Lodge.

The Nature Conservancy helped create the Private Lands Initiative, which involved landowners around the installation, Hall said.

"This is an amazing day, not just physically, but in terms of accomplishment," said Mike Andrews, chief operations officer of the Nature Conservancy in Washington. "Not many places do we come together to celebrate the restoration of something almost lost."

Fort Bragg and seven other Army posts have almost 1 million acres of training land with 460,000 acres of **red-cockaded woodpecker** habitat, said Tad Davis, the Army's deputy assistant secretary for environment, safety and occupational health.

“That just gives you an idea of the magnitude and the challenge we are faced with as an Army,” said Davis, who is a retired colonel and former Fort Bragg garrison commander.

From an environmental standpoint, the milestone marks the first documented recovery for the bird species, which was listed as endangered in 1970.

From a military standpoint, the milestone could mean the reduction or removal of training restrictions.

“We still have farther to go,” said Col. Al Aycock, Fort Bragg's garrison commander. “We still have more **red-cockaded woodpecker** potential breeding groups to find.”

Wildlife biologists counted more than 350 potential breeding groups, which was the target for the “Sandhills East” population on and around Fort Bragg, the first documented recovery for that species. In 1992, that number was 238.

“To celebrate the recovery of a species is a very, very rare thing,” Andrews said.

The partnership at Fort Bragg “has been a great laboratory for our learning at the Nature Conservancy,” Andrews said. “We have learned so much, and I assure you we are trying to transfer that learning to all the places around the world in which we work.”

The bird is about 7 inches long and has a black-and-white back. Males have a few red feathers, or a “cockade.”

“This is a bird that birders will tell you folks come from around the world to see,” Andrews said. “It's not just a peculiarity of the Sandhills, but an intriguing species for birders from all over the world.”

More than a third of Fort Bragg's \$6 million annual natural resources budget is spent on endangered species, said Terry Myers, chief of the natural resources division.

Fort Bragg has limitations on what can be done within 200 feet of a tree where the woodpecker has a cavity. There also are restrictions on digging, shooting and vehicle traffic around cavity trees, Mike Lynch, Fort Bragg's director of plans, training and mobilization, said after the ceremony.

“We hope to be able to move through those and reduce many of those in the next month or so as a result of this milestone,” Lynch said.

Military editor Henry Cuninghame can be reached at [cuninghamh@fayettevillenc.com](mailto:cuninghamh@fayettevillenc.com) or 486-3585.

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