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June 9, 2006

Bird Sense

Section: Opinion

Our View: A woodpecker joins the Army; Fort Bragg becomes a conservation leader.

The opponent hardly seems as formidable as an advancing column of tanks or a rain of paratroopers dropping from the sky. But the little bird — all of 1½ ounces, 8½ inches long and a 14-inch wingspan — has given the U.S. Army one of its toughest battles.

In the end, it's also given the Army some priceless lessons.

The **red-cockaded woodpecker** and the Army got on a collision course in 1970, when the birds went on the federal endangered-species list. Fort Bragg and seven other Army posts, with about a million acres of training land, share nearly half that space with the woodpeckers.

The birds nest almost exclusively in old longleaf pines, trees almost as endangered as the woodpeckers, thanks to centuries of overharvesting. The best-protected remaining stands of longleaf pine are in places like Fort Bragg, where they were protected from the cutting that decimated the tree population elsewhere. That meant the woodpeckers were there too.

The birds' presence forced Bragg to severely restrict training in areas around the birds' nests. Some Army officials say that ultimately, the bird could have shut the post down. At the least, their presence could have led to sharp reductions here. That would be devastating to the Army, and to this area's economy.

Thanks to some forward thinking at high levels of the Army, Fort Bragg is thriving, and so are the woodpeckers and their favored trees. Everyone won.

Instead of fighting the endangered-species regulations — or, worse, giving up — the Army chose to fight for the species' survival. Training around their nests was restricted. The post drilled cavities for the birds to nest and roost in and conducted regular controlled burns of the

undergrowth around the trees, providing the best possible habitat for the birds.

Just as important, the Army worked with other organizations — especially the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Nature Conservancy, to expand the range of longleaf pines outside Bragg's borders. Aggressive land acquisition programs have preserved more woodpecker habitat around Fort Bragg — good for birds and good buffer for the post as well.

And as the Army's managers learned about land conservation, they learned other “green” practices as well, programs that result in energy savings and lessened pollution. Fort Bragg is this region's leader in “sustainability” initiatives.

Army, Fish and Wildlife, and Nature Conservancy officials gathered at Fort Bragg this week to celebrate their success in saving the woodpecker. Their program has reached its goals five years early. Some training restrictions may soon be waived, with no detriment to the birds. Thousands of acres of longleaf pines have been saved — and added to the available woodpecker habitat.

All in all, a pretty good definition of success.

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