

https://www.thepilot.com/news/sandhills-program-benefits-woodpeckers-landowners/article_d2c867c6-1cf1-11ef-b9d6-0bcf82bf44cb.html

FEATURED

Safe Harbor

Sandhills Program Benefits Woodpeckers, Landowners

BY ANA RISANO || Staff Writer ana@thepilot.com

May 28, 2024



A sign noting a red-cockaded woodpecker cavity tree. ANA RISANO / The Pilot

Moore County is known for its longleaf pine forests but not as much for the endangered woodpecker that relies on the fire-maintained land for survival.

The red-cockaded woodpecker, about seven inches long, is a native species that became endangered in the 1970s due to habitat loss throughout the Southeast. These birds nest in cavities in longleaf pines, which have historically been grown as a timber source.

Following several years of controversy, the Sandhills Safe Harbor Program was established in 1995 to help maintain forests for the woodpeckers and reduce federal regulations from the Endangered Species Act on private land.

“It’s a species that requires old-growth, longleaf pine forests that are actively managed with fire,” said Jeff Marcus, the longleaf pine restoration director for the Sandhills chapter of The Nature Conservancy. “In order to protect the bird, there’s a need to protect those trees and the trees that it lives in.”

But Marcus said private landowners didn’t want regulations on their land, especially if timbering their property was a source of income for them.

A small committee was formed to devise a program addressing private landowner concerns. It included local biologist Dr. Jay Carter and Robert Bonnie and Michael Bean from the Environmental Defense Fund.

“And like a lot of these things, the concerns were way overblown,” Carter said. “The woodpecker population at that time was decreasing rapidly here in North Carolina, as well as in the Southeast. The idea that woodpeckers were going to suddenly fall out of the sky and affect your property rights was far-fetched.”

The Safe Harbor program is fairly simple. If someone volunteers to participate in the program, run by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, they agree to manage their land in a way compatible with the birds. That means allowing the trees to continue to grow and conducting prescribed burns.

Marcus said if more birds move into the area, the landowner would not be “punished” with additional restrictions. The owner is only responsible for the number of woodpeckers on the property at the time of enrollment in the program or the property’s “baseline.”

If their agreed-on land management activities unintentionally harm or kill woodpeckers, they will not face legal action.

Some guidelines include agreeing to a yearly check-in, monitoring the woodpecker population and giving advance notice of changes to the property so that birds may be relocated.

“It’s really a program that’s more designed to help the landowner than it is to help the birds,” Marcus said. “But it has done a remarkable job of helping the birds because what it did was help establish trust.”

Safe Harbor has been a big success in the Sandhills; Marcus said there are about 148 landowners in the program, representing roughly 65,870 acres. Some notable properties include the Walthour-Moss Foundation, Weymouth Woods and Pinehurst Resort’s golf courses.

But woodpeckers are sensitive to several factors and have not done well in the more developed areas.

“It’s sort of a death of a thousand cuts,” Marcus said. “These things make their living by eating insects underneath the bark of trees. And the bigger the pine trees, the better the quality of the foraging. Woodpeckers need anywhere from 75 acres up to as much as 200 acres per family group to provide them with enough food and insects to feed themselves.”

Kerry Brust, a wildlife biologist with the Sandhills Ecological Institute, said there are about 70 red-cockaded woodpecker family groups in Moore County, 60 of which live on private lands. About 10 families live at the Sandhills Game Lands and five at Weymouth Woods.

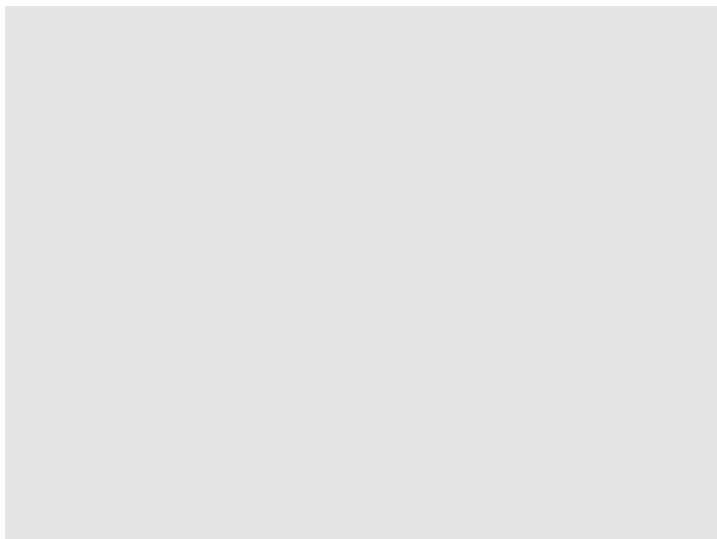
Family groups differ in size but often include at least three to four birds, consisting of a “breeding pair” and their offspring.

Brust said the birds are measured in groups because it’s a better determiner of population trends and the overall health of the species.

Red-cockaded Woodpeckers

This bird species requires open forests and older pine trees for its nesting cavities.

“When you’re in the program, you are encouraged to do things that maintain the forest structure ecologically,” said John Hammond, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist. “If the mid-story changes too much, they just can’t live in that habitat.”



Red-cockaded woodpecker enjoying a bug snack. Courtesy of Brady Beck

Fire-maintained forests allow these birds to reach the forest floor to forage for insects and help prevent predators from reaching them.

Hammond said males tend to forage higher in the trees and branches, and females stay closer to the trunk and ground. If too many shrubs or smaller trees encroach on the tree surface, the birds can be vulnerable to predation.

These birds live in extended family groups, occupying territories passed from generation to generation.

Carter said it takes a family group about 12 years to complete a cavity from “beginning to end” in a longleaf pine.

“That’s essentially three generations of birds,” Carter said. “A generation of woodpeckers is about four years. So it’s the granddaddy that has to start the cavity so that the grandson can actually nest in it.”

The woodpecker is also a keystone species because about 30 other species rely on its cavities for nesting. Other animals that use the cavities include bats, snakes, flying squirrels, bluebirds and more.

“None of these other species would be able to make a cavity on their own,” Carter said. “They’re totally dependent on naturally occurring cavities or red-cockaded woodpeckers making them a cavity.”

Hammond added that “from an ecological perspective,” the woodpecker helps “emphasize the value of longleaf pine forests and the associated ecological communities.”

The Program in Action

Bob Farren, director of golf course management at Pinehurst Resort and Country Club, was involved with the resort's signing of the first Safe Harbor agreement in 1995.

“(The agreement) actually validated a lot of the things that we do to provide the condition levels and the presentation we want to have for the courses that we were doing anyways without even thinking about, necessarily, the habitat for the woodpeckers,” he said.

Farren said being in the program has shown that the woodpeckers can “coexist with golf.”

“What we look at is a holistic way of managing the acreage that we are responsible for for golf,” Farren said. “I think it's integrated with the red-cockaded woodpecker Safe Harbor management concepts.”

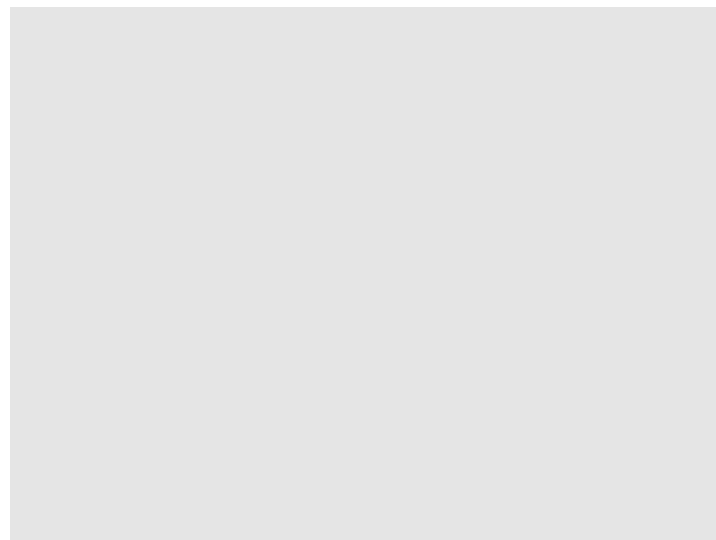
Several cavity trees are marked across the resort's courses. Farren said all the courses are within the program, including the recently opened No. 10 course on the Sandmines development in Aberdeen.

Farren spoke of the 2014 Open and Women's Open back-to-back championships at Course No. 2, when a cavity tree — about six feet from the main bleacher setup — had woodpecker eggs. Experts said the resort needed to move the bleachers, but Farren said that wasn't possible.

Red-cockaded woodpeckers hatch in the late spring and early summer, so he said biologists were “hyper-sensitive” about monitoring those fledglings and confirming they weren't “interrupted by all of the public activity around the cavities.”

Farren said the birds left the nest during the U.S. Open despite the championship happening.

Also, roughly 100 acres of Auman family land in West End participate in the Safe Harbor Program. The Aumans are most notably known for their peaches, but the family has also raised cattle and chickens, leased property to other farmers and managed timber forests.



Bob Farren pointing out woodpecker cavity trees on Pinehurst Resort's courses. ANA RISANO / The Pilot

Nancy Cunningham and Laura Pitts, sisters to the late Clyde Watts Auman, said their family joined the program soon after it started in the mid-1990s.

“The word always was in our family, ‘you leave things better than you found them,’” Cunningham said. “Stewardship of land and resources have really been drone into us, so it’s just naturally something we are all interested in.”

Woodpeckers reside in the family’s timber forests and other maintained longleaf areas of their properties. In addition to harvesting the trees, the family has contractors who bale pine needles.

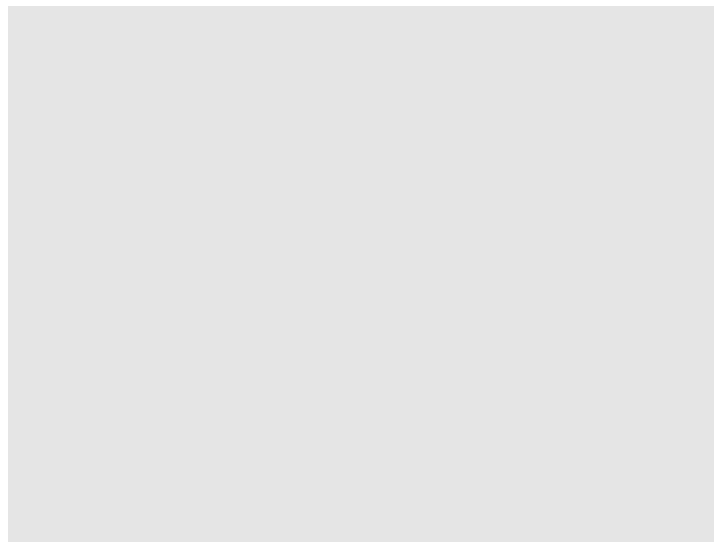
Cunningham said the family has gotten “a lot of joy” from participating in the program, and Pitts agreed.

“It was something we were very excited about,” said Pitts. “Anything that protects the longleaf forest is wonderful for us.”

With the program’s success, other programs have popped up nationwide, including a statewide version of Safe Harbor administered by the Wildlife Resources Commission.

To enroll or learn more about the program, contact Sandhills Conservation Planner Lydie Costes at lydie.costes@tnc.org or John Hammond at (984) 308-0813.

Ana Risano



Nancy Cunningham and Laura Pitts on their family farm in West End. ANA RISANO / The Pilot