



June 2018 Newsletter

of the

Rockbridge Bird Club, encouraging
the enjoyment, knowledge, &
conservation of birds in the Rockbridge Area

Calendar

Unless otherwise noted, program meetings are held at 7 pm in the Piovano Room at Rockbridge Regional Library, in downtown Lexington, and field trips generally meet at the Lexington Food Lion parking lot.

Next newsletter will be the September edition. See you in the fall!

[Red-cockaded Woodpecker, [Shirrp calls and rattle calls](#)]

— recorded by Geoffrey A. Keller, Georgia, 5 June 1994

Bob's Perch: Pilgrimage to the Land of the Red Cockade

When you first drive into The Nature Conservancy's (TNC's) Piney Grove Preserve, you immediately feel the change in habitat. The fields and small woodlots of Southeast Virginia give way suddenly to widely spaced mature pine trees high above areas of grass and forbs, along with hardwoods no more than three or four feet tall.

Here and there a larger pine seems to have a smoother surface, and on one side its trunk is coated with oozing sap extending several vertical feet. After a few minutes you realize that this is the center of attention for several birds moving quickly among the trees. They're bringing food to a round hole within the sap-covered area, where their young are at the bottom of a cavity.

The birds look somewhat familiar, similar to a Hairy Woodpecker but more subdued in color. Their most striking characteristic is a solid white cheek; they lack the other bold black and white markings of the Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers. And the only red mark the male has is a tiny, usually invisible "cockade" at the upper border of his cheek.

A description of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker seems necessary because we rarely encounter these birds: Piney Grove is home to their northernmost population and the only remaining habitat in the state of Virginia (though they're now being reintroduced in the Dismal Swamp nearby). Seven of us headed to the Preserve on May 22, at the generous invitation of TNC staff to our Club, hoping to get a look at these birds as they fed this year's young. We weren't long into our introduction to the features of their nest sites (they peck small holes around the nest, causing sap to run down and form a surface that keeps tree-climbing snakes away) when birds started darting from tree to tree near the one we were looking at, finally entering one at a time to offer a meal to the nestlings (probably four) newly part of this "family group."



Birding at the foot of a large pine marked to indicate it has a woodpecker cavity (not currently in use; if it were, we wouldn't be there). This habitat is in transition: managers will thin the pines over time, and repeated prescribed burns will eventually clear the hardwoods (many of them sweet gums), allowing grasses and forbs to complete the savanna landscape.

Photo by Wendy Richards; caption by editor

Our guides spoke of "family groups" rather than "breeding pairs," because young from the previous couple of years tend to stay with each nesting pair, some working on their own roosting cavities in nearby trees and some helping with feeding at the current nest. These family groupings are part of the reason territories must be so large – generally more than one hundred acres per family – making the 3,200 acres of the preserve a modest beginning for the Conservancy's goal of restoring many thousands more to the pine savanna these birds require.

When the Conservancy purchased the first acreage in the preserve in 1998, there were as few as two to four breeding pairs remaining in the area. Now the population includes at least 14 breeding pairs, with at least 96 birds included in the family groups, and the numbers have been rising steadily in recent years. We got to see evidence of this breeding success when TNC staffers Sam Lindblom and Bobby Clontz pulled out a live feed camera and light on an extendable pole that took us "inside" a cavity to see four nestlings — who wondered why we didn't have any beetle larvae or other good bugs for their dinner. Other family members were none too happy with this interference, but we took only a few minutes, and as we left the area, they returned to feeding duties.

We got to spend several hours that evening and the next day talking with Sam and Bobby and Brian van Eerden about habitat preservation, interactions among species,



Pine savanna farther along in its fire-and-thinning-influenced evolution: widely spaced pines and golden switch grass. Photo by Claire Thompson of TNC, May 2018.

and the many wonders of the pine savanna. They're convinced that the key to success (given the right soil and water conditions) comes down to one word: fire. A unique set of circumstances in the Piney Grove area that included a large forest fire in the 1940's (when most firefighters were away at war) allowed some savanna to survive; twenty years of frequent prescribed burns have improved and expanded suitable habitat, which has led to growing Red-cockaded populations. TNC staff have their eyes on lots of additional land, either purchased from large lumber companies or already included in state forests, where they can leverage this knowledge and, working with partners, continue their success.

The region's combination of low brushy areas, mature pines, and lots of water attracts a variety of other birds, and we spent time looking for them, too. A lake on the property of the 4H Conference Center, where we stayed, gave us looks at Prothonotary Warblers building a nest and a Northern Parula singing strongly, along with Pine and Yellow-throated Warblers, a Yellow-throated Vireo, Red-headed Woodpeckers, Green Heron, and — well, you get the idea. Other highlights within the Preserve itself included a singing Northern Bobwhite, several flycatchers, a Yellow-breasted Chat, and three Summer Tanagers, and many others.

It was an inspiring and hopeful 24 hours, and we're grateful to Claire Thompson from TNC's office in Charlottesville for convincing Sam and Bobby and Brian to spend some of their work days birding with us and explaining the strategy and tactics that are leading to real improvements in viability for the Red-cockaded Woodpecker and other species that use this special habitat.

—Bob Biersack

Here's an account of a long-term relationship with Red-cockaded Woodpeckers (RCWs), by retired Marine Corps LtCol (and Bird Club member) David Buckner:

My last tour of duty in the Marine Corps before retiring was as the Base Range Control Officer at MCB Camp Lejeune, NC. I was responsible for the control of all the base's air, land, and sea space that was used for training. Unfortunately, large portions of the base's maneuver areas were also the habitat of the RCW. This bird was attracted to loblolly pines over 50 years in age. Why? Because at that age the pines tend to develop red heart disease, which makes it easier for the little darlings to peck out a nesting cavity. The RCW, however, was not the most persistent of birds. Quite often it seemed as if they just forgot what they were doing and abandoned a cavity.



Male RCW, from [Audubon webpage](#)

Because of the bird's endangered status, we had all sorts of restrictions placed upon training activities. Tank and vehicle trails could get only so close to loblolly stands so as to not damage root systems by soil compression. It was important to ensure the pines could achieve the 50-year death-by-red-heart-disease age. Obviously we could not clear any loblolly-infested areas to create new ranges. I tried to get around this problem by suggesting that we drill holes in pines outside the loblolly area to attract the RCW. No, no said the Fish and Wildlife people. The little darlings had to do the cavity work all on their own.

Then came Hurricane Hugo in 1989. It hit South Carolina with 189-mile-per-hour winds and went through the Francis Marion National Forest like c—p through a goose. Snapped enormous stands of 50-year-old loblolly pines right off in the middle. All that wonderful red heart disease gone to waste. Several weeks later came a proposal from Fish and Wildlife to drill holes in our loblollies and move the Francis Marion RCW population to Camp Lejeune. That did not happen. They went instead to the Croatan National Forest. How they adapted, I do not know.

It may seem as if I was resisting the efforts to protect the RCW. Nothing could be further from the truth. The law is the law. Any time a unit was found to have violated Base regulations regarding the RCW, the Commanding Officer of the unit was hammered. Not that we loved the little darlings, but that the law had been broken. Say what you will, military bases around the United States are exemplars of natural resource conservation. Camp Lejeune is one and Camp Pendleton, California, is another. Conservationists and naturalists in both states will agree.

— David Buckner

A note on longleafs, loblollies, and woodpeckers

Before Europeans arrived, longleaf pine savanna stretched nearly unbroken across 92 million acres of the southeastern coastal plain. Then, as a result of logging, land use conversion, and other human activities, the loblolly pine moved in — a pioneer on disturbed land and able to outcompete the fire-resistant longleaf pine when fire is suppressed. These days, loblolly is by far the predominant pine planted for timber; the remaining longleaf savanna is fragmented, often in poor condition, and now covering less than 5% of its original extent.

As for the woodpeckers—when Europeans arrived, 1 to 1.6 million RCW groups inhabited pine woods, mostly longleaf savanna; by 1970, the population was under 10,000 individuals, in isolated and declining populations. The Nature Conservancy and partners are working on restoring and expanding the rich longleaf ecosystem from remnants; meanwhile, the woodpecker is able to use other mature pines for roosting and nesting, including loblolly, as at both Camp Lejeune and Piney Grove. Today the Red-cockaded Woodpecker population is over 14,000 birds.

The Nature Conservancy's longleaf savanna strategy includes planting young pines, using truly local plant material—roosting trees for RCWs 50 or 60 years hence!

—Alexia Smith

(based on materials from the North Carolina State [Department of Forestry](#) and The Nature Conservancy)



Young longleaf pine & prescribed burn. Photo by Jeff Marcus, The Nature Conservancy.

Thanks to Bonnie Bernstein, Betty Besal, and Phyllis Fevrier for their assorted large shares in organizing the June 2 Spring Potluck, and thanks as well to Boxerwood for providing the venue. It was a jolly occasion in a beautiful setting!

This is our last newsletter till September. Have a wonderful summer!



JOIN THE CLUB by making out a check for \$15 or more per household to Rockbridge Bird Club and sending it, along with your address, email address, and phone number, to Betty Besal, 120 Chavis Avenue, Lexington, VA 24450. Thank you.

For more information about the Club, visit our website at www.rockbridgebirdclub.org and find us on Facebook.

Contact the Club by email at rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com or call Alexia Smith, 540-463-4010, or Laura Neale, 540-261-1909.

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