Red-cockaded Woodpecker

Description:
The Red-cockaded woodpecker is a small, white and black woodpecker with a barred back. The most distinguishing feature is a black cap and nape that encircle large white cheek patches. Rarely visible, except perhaps during the breeding season and periods of territorial defense, the male has a small red streak on each side of its black cap called a cockade, hence its name. Their underside is white or grayish, with notable black spots along the sides of the breast.

Size:
The woodpecker is small in size, about 7” in length, similar to the common Cardinal.

Habitat:
These woodpeckers are adapted to mature, living, open-pine forests. It is estimated that there are about 6,000 groups of red-cockaded woodpeckers, or 15,000 birds from Florida to Virginia and west to southeast Oklahoma and eastern Texas, representing about 1 percent of the woodpecker's original range. The red-cockaded is the only woodpecker which excavates cavities exclusively in living pine trees. Cavity trees that are being actively used have numerous, small resin wells which exude sap. The birds keep the sap flowing apparently as a cavity defense mechanism against rat snakes and possibly other predators. The typical territory for a group ranges from about 125 to 200 acres. Habitat loss and degradation have greatly reduced its range and negatively affected this species, which has been considered Federally Endangered since 1968.

Food:
The red-cockaded woodpecker is omnivorous. Its diet consists mainly of adult larvae and eggs of beetles, ants and earthworms. It will also feed on various seeds, nuts, and fruits. It forages for food by ripping loose bark from the surface with an upward or sideways movement of the bill or strip bark away with its feet.

Offspring:
The Red-cockaded woodpecker is a territorial, non-migratory, cooperative breeding species, frequently having the same mate for several years. The first brood is laid between April and June. The clutch contains 2-5 eggs. Incubation is done by both parents for approximately of 10 to 13 days. Most chicks fledge after 26-29 days, but may remain dependent on the parents for up to 5 months.

Fun Facts:
- The woodpecker strips away the bark on the tree around the entrance of the nesting hole. The resin and the smooth trunk create a defense against snakes, one of the bird’s major predators.
- The tail is used as a prop, or brace, and supports the weight of the woodpecker while hammering into the tree. Woodpeckers can hammer the wood more than 100 times a minute.
- The woodpecker's tongue is 4 times the length of its beak: quite a mouthful! The woodpecker uses its barbed tongue to probe the holes it makes and to scour out ants and other delicious insects.