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To: Highlands News-Sun

From: Archbold Biological Station

Date Published: January 27, 2017

Author: Archbold Biological Station

Woodpeckers on the go

A few months ago researchers from Archbold Biological Station's Avian Ecology Program traveled to Osceola National Forest in north Florida to bring six Federally Endangered Red-cockaded Woodpeckers back to Avon Park Air Force Range. Called 'translocation', moving birds from large populations to small populations is a conservation tool used on critically endangered species throughout the world. Along with prescribed fire and management of the trees used by the woodpeckers for their nest cavities, translocation is an increasingly important tool for Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. Osceola National Forest's Red-cockaded Woodpecker population is large enough that it is considered a donor population, able to sustain the removal of a few birds to help other smaller populations grow.

Emily Angell organized and led the translocation of the birds, along with Greg Thompson and Jessica Spickler. They spent a week in north Florida working with the US Forest Service staff to find where each of the woodpeckers they hoped to translocate was roosting at night. Red-cockaded woodpeckers are unique among North American woodpeckers because they excavate cavities for nesting and roosting in old, living pine trees. On the night of the translocation, the Archbold team and US Forest Service biologists visited each roost to carefully trap six of the woodpeckers in their cavities.

The three male and three female woodpeckers were placed in dark, safe containers to keep them calm and transported throughout the night. They arrived in the dark at the Air Force Range, placed in selected cavity trees and released at dawn with a potential mate. Dr. Reed Bowman, Director of Archbold's Avian Ecology Program stated "The birds we paired up don't always form a bond. Most often the translocated woodpeckers move from the site where we released them and find a new mate elsewhere within the Air Force Range." Prior to 2016, 42 woodpeckers had been translocated to the

Air Force Range. Dr. Bowman added, "Over 80% of these translocated birds have remained successfully in the Air Force Range population for at least one year, and 63% have bred successfully." This has helped to grow the population from 19 breeding groups on the Air Force Range in 1994 to 33 groups in 2016. Archbold biologists also move woodpeckers within the Air Force Range. If a single male occupying a cluster of cavity trees is having problems finding a mate, a young female may be moved to his territory. Most of these females stay with their new mates and become established as breeding groups that also help build up the population. The addition of birds to the Air Force Range population has increased local genetic diversity and reduced some negative effects of inbreeding, such as poor hatching success that the Archbold scientists observed earlier. Dr. Bowman explained "Genetic rescue may be one of the most important reasons for translocation as populations of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers and other endangered birds become smaller and more isolated". Dr. Hilary Swain, Archbold's Executive Director added. "It has been very rewarding for our scientists to work closely with the US Department of Defense at Avon Park Air Force Range, helping them maintain a natural environment that provides for military training, ensuring compliance with federal regulations for the military mission, and enhancing the important conservation values of the Range."

Photo 1: Male Red-cockaded Woodpecker at Avon Park Airforce Range. Photo by Emily Angell.



Photo 2: Emily Angell places a Red-cockaded Woodpecker in a cavity at Avon Park Airforce Range after it was moved from Osceola National Forest. Photo by Archbold Biological Station.

