

Grade 8 Expository Prompt

Read the following passages, *Protecting the Nest* and *Red-cockaded Woodpecker*. Then respond to the question that follows.

The SDE extends thanks the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation for allowing us to use their materials.

Protecting the Nest

By Ben Davis,

Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation Information Specialist

Imagine if you got paid to climb 30 to 40 foot trees in beautiful, southeastern Oklahoma. I can't help but think, how terrifying, yet what an amazing view. This is typical work for Clay Barnes, wildlife technician, who monitors one of Oklahoma's endangered species, the red-cockaded woodpecker.

He examines trees to find tiny, 3-inch holes, 30 to 40 feet above his head. Signs of occupation are shown by a small hole in a live pine tree, with tree resin trails around the hole.

The red-cockaded woodpecker is an endangered species that has reached the edge of extinction, but thanks to Barnes and Senior Biologist Dr. John Skeen, the McCurtain County Wildlife Management Area provides a number of homes for the birds. Every six weeks, Barnes loads his ATV with several sections of 10-foot ladder, straps on his tool belt, and climbs trees all day to assure the homes are in good condition.

"Few people know there are jobs like mine out there," said Barnes. "It is pretty active management, very involved. It's nice to show the diversity¹ of the Wildlife Department.

Red-cockaded woodpeckers are quite particular. Once a squirrel, wasp, or other animals gets into their hole, they will abandon it. It takes a red-cockaded woodpecker eight months to a year to build a new cavity and without a hole to nest in; they are at greater risk the entire time they are building new homes.

"We install man-made nest boxes in the trees, and clean out the holes they aren't using so the birds have somewhere to go if they abandon a nest," said Barnes. He is never quite sure what he'll find inside. "I've found wasps, spiders, slugs, snakeskin, and dirt daubers in the cavities", he said. "Hickory nuts and acorns (stored by squirrels) are the hardest to fish out.

¹ diversity: variety

I have to put resin on the end of my wire to clear them out. Sometimes I can clean pretty quickly, and others take a while because there's so much to dig out."

This particular woodpecker is the only bird in North America that mines cavities in living old grove pine trees. It prefers park-like settings that are burned frequently to keep the undergrowth² minimal.

"The canopy is thinned and the undergrowth is removed to allow sunlight to reach the ground and open the forest floor," said Barnes. "By reducing canopy cover, it reduces competition from other trees so they get more sunlight and water."

The woodpeckers aren't the only species benefiting from the habitat work, what's good for the woodpecker has also been good for deer, turkey and quail.

Despite the time, effort, and potential stings required to maintain habitat³ for the red-cockaded woodpecker, Barnes believes the restoration work being done at Beaver's Bend⁴ important.

"These birds are endangered because of human impact, so it is our responsibility to get involved and restore their habitat," said Barnes.

² Undergrowth: low growth (as of herbs and shrubs) on the floor of a forest

³ habitat: the place or environment where a plant or animal naturally lives

⁴ Beaver's Bend: Beaver's Bend State Park located in southeastern Oklahoma

Red-cockaded Woodpecker
(*Picoides borealis*)

(Federally listed as Endangered)

From the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation

Description: A medium-sized woodpecker, approximately 8.5 inches in length with a prominent white patch on each cheek and black-and-white striped back. The woodpecker's sides and belly are lightly marked with black spots and streaks. Although the male Red-cockaded Woodpecker has a tiny red patch behind each eye near the ear (the cockade⁵), the large white cheek patch is the most conspicuous field mark for both sexes. This species is often mistaken for the Downy Woodpecker which has a white back and a wide black stripe on each side of the head extending through the eye and across the cheek. Red-cockaded Woodpeckers feed on insects which they pick off the bark or trees.

Habitat: Red-cockaded Woodpeckers depend upon large tracts of mature pine woodlands. Preferred habitat consists of mature live pine trees (greater than 60 years old) growing in an open woodland condition with a grassy understory⁶. Nesting and roosting cavities are excavated⁷ in live pine trees and the woodpeckers seek out older trees that have become infected with a fungal disease called redheart disease. Red-cockaded Woodpeckers live in extended family groups that may contain two to five adults plus the young from the current year's brood.

Current and Historic Distribution: Currently, there are approximately 15 family groups of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers in Oklahoma. All of these birds live in southeastern Oklahoma in the McCurtain County Wilderness Area, which is owned by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation and is the largest tract of uncut pine forest in the state. Historically, Red-cockaded Woodpeckers were more widespread in Shortleaf Pine woodlands in the Ouachita Mountains. Outside of Oklahoma, Red-cockaded Woodpeckers were once found in pine forests across the southeastern United States, but currently they exist in isolated populations in only eight other states.

Reasons for Decline: Forestry operations and other activities that result in widespread cutting of old-growth timber have limited the availability of suitable habitat for the Red-cockaded Woodpecker which requires mature, living pine trees that are at least 60 years old for nesting. Few areas of old-growth pine remain in the U.S. to provide the habitat required for the species.

⁵cockade: an ornament worn on a hat as a badge

⁶ understory: the vegetative layer between the top layer of a forest and the ground cover

⁷ excavated: hollowed out

Writing Prompt

Using evidence from the passages, Red-cockaded Woodpecker and Protecting the Nest, write an **expository** essay explaining how the Red-cockaded Woodpecker's nesting habits have caused this bird to be placed on the endangered species list.

Grade 8 PASS Standards:

Reading/Literature: 3.1-4

Writing: 1.1-5; 2.2.a-e