

Georgia WILD Newsletter: March 2009

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Twister wipes out rare woodpecker habitat

The coverage of longleaf forests throughout the southern landscape is a tiny fraction of historic levels, with less than 10,000 acres that may be considered old-growth. Some of the best remaining examples of old-growth longleaf stands are found in the Red Hills quail hunting properties of Thomas and Grady counties in southwest Georgia.

Natural longleaf pine forests are unique from other southern pines in many ways. For example, they may live for centuries, while all other southern pines rarely exceed more than 150 years old. Longleaf is dependent upon fire to keep seedlings of other pines and hardwood sprouts at bay. And, longleaf usually occurs in uneven-aged stands with regeneration of younger trees occurring in canopy gaps created by some disturbance. The cause of these disturbances may be the death of an individual tree from a lightning strike or the toppling of hundreds of acres from a hurricane or tornado.

Much of the wildlife that calls longleaf pine forests home are likewise unique, from the fossorial animals like the pocket gopher and gopher tortoise that make their homes below ground to escape the flames to the red cockaded woodpecker that builds cavities in live trees high above the reach of fires.

In the very early morning hours of Feb. 19, the Red Hills lost examples of both a rare forest habitat and a rare species. In the darkness, a tornado touched down in eastern Grady County, cutting a 500-yard wide swath for more than eight miles reaching into Thomas County and crossing several historic properties. Myrtlewood and Sinkola plantations both suffered severe damage. Overall, about 200 acres of true old-growth longleaf was erased from the landscape, along with four red cockaded woodpecker clusters.

These four woodpecker clusters had a total of 27 cavity trees before the storm. Only one single cavity tree remained standing in the aftermath.

Hundreds of giant longleaf, some approaching 300 years old, were twisted off at the ground. While this is a completely natural process, it is difficult to comprehend. Initial reports of the impact listed at least \$10 million in damages in Thomas and Grady, with more than 100 homes, a private school, Southwestern State Hospital and other buildings hit.

Normally, biologists create new artificial cavities following wind damage to a red-cockaded woodpecker cluster. But in this situation the destruction was nearly complete with too few trees remaining to replace cavities.

The hope is these homeless woodpeckers will find new homes by becoming part of other family groups in the area. Within just a few miles of the lost clusters, there are 190 other red-cockaded woodpecker groups, making this population the largest on private land anywhere. *Phil Spivey is a wildlife biologist with the Wildlife Resources Division's Nongame Conservation Section.*

Georgia part of program to bolster eagle estimates

Most states, including Georgia, have been aerially monitoring their nesting bald eagles for the past two to three decades, work that has documented an amazing population recovery.

The effort involves returning to known territories each nesting season to check the status of each territory, as well as investigate promising reports of new nesting activity and search for nests in good habitat along the way. This collective data set was the evidence needed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to support decisions to down-list, then de-list, the species from protection under the Endangered Species Act.

However, some unknown number of nests remain undetected within the many square miles of suitable nesting habitat that are not covered by this method. Although eagles are still protected by other federal and state laws, the Fish and Wildlife Service has implemented a post-delisting monitoring program to more accurately determine the actual nationwide population and enable detection of significant changes in that number. This effort requires additional searches of suitable habitat within random blocks in order to get an idea about the proportion of actual nests that are being detected through standard monitoring techniques.

This nesting season, Georgia was assigned five blocks, each a 10-kilometer square, in the coastal zone where our eagle nesting density is greatest. DNR observers teamed with a Fish and Wildlife Service biologist/pilot to conduct searches by plane of these blocks on Feb. 24 and 25. One new nest was discovered in Camden County.

Biologists will be checking all known Georgia nests this month, including the newly discovered one, to determine productivity.

-- *Jim Ozier*

Ft. Stewart woodpeckers

During the afternoon of Feb. 11, several teams of biologists from the Fish and Wildlife Branch at Fort Stewart and from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources spread out into the pine woods of the Army base. The exercise had been planned for the previous week, but was postponed due to excessively cold weather. Now, Mother Nature seemed to have over-corrected and the warm temperatures brought out hordes of whining mosquitoes.

Equipped with long-handled nets and color band data, the biologists were trying to identify selected juvenile red-cockaded woodpeckers as they returned to their roost cavities, then capture up to three of these birds for translocation to Moody Forest Natural Area. The goal: Help save Moody Forest's population of the federally endangered birds from disappearing. The population there could not go much lower: It was down to a single male. Translocation of juvenile woodpeckers is a proven technique in helping small populations grow to more sustainable levels.

In reality, this effort was the culmination of many months of work at both sites. The habitat at Moody Forest is being restored primarily through the careful reintroduction of fire into the system. At Fort Stewart, extensive habitat management, banding and monitoring led to the availability of these young birds, even after the base had met its voluntary commitments for providing woodpeckers to several other recipient sites.

And thanks to the cooperation of DNR's partners at Fort Stewart, two females and one male woodpecker were captured and transported the 30 miles to Moody Forest, where they were released early the next morning into suitable habitat where the single bird resides. If all goes well, the birds will stay and help establish two nesting pairs.

The DNR is very grateful for the help of Fort Stewart personnel in completing this move, and for their many contributions to helping conserve Georgia's natural diversity. Fort Stewart natural resource managers have demonstrated that through careful management, the base can support a steadily growing woodpecker population to help with range-wide recovery, provide several juvenile woodpeckers for translocation to other sites each year to help those populations grow, and still excel in its primary mission of training soldiers.

Jim Ozier is a program manager with the Georgia Wildlife Resources Division's Nongame Conservation Section.