

**Petition to Reclassify the Red-cockaded Woodpecker
(*Picoides borealis*) as a Species of Special Concern in
Florida**

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Introduction

By this petition, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) is requested to reclassify the red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) from a Threatened Species (Rule 68A-27.004, F.A.C.) to a Species of Special Concern (Rule 68A-27.005, F.A.C.) under the provisions established in Rule 68A-27.0012, F.A.C. During the past decade, aggressive management of red-cockaded woodpeckers (RCWs) and their habitat has led to an overall range-wide increase in the species' abundance (James 1995, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2000). An FWC Bureau of Wildlife Diversity Conservation staff evaluation of recent research and survey data indicates that RCWs no longer meet the criteria for listing as a Threatened Species, as defined in Rule 68A-1.004, F.A.C., but may still qualify as a Species of Special Concern. Reclassifying the RCW as a Species of Special Concern will more appropriately reflect the species' status. Continued management and monitoring of RCW populations in Florida will be necessary to prevent the species from reverting to its threatened status.

Biological Information

Under FWC listing criteria in Rule 68A-27.0012, F.A.C. and definitions in Rule 68A-1.004 F.A.C., species are classified on the state list according to their range-wide status. Accordingly, information reported here is gleaned from throughout the range of the RCW.

The habitat requirements of the RCW are both unique and specific: the birds exclusively excavate their nest and roost cavities in old-age (80+ years) live pines within mature, open pine forests with sparse midstory vegetation. Although once the dominant upland vegetation in the southeastern United States (approximately 55 to 92 million acres) (Platt et al. 1988, Ware et al. 1993, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2000), these forests have been reduced to approximately 3% of their former range since European settlement (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2000). Land-use changes related to silviculture, agriculture, and development account for most of this loss. Former or potential RCW habitat also has been degraded or rendered unsuitable in Florida and elsewhere by fire suppression, alteration in frequency or season of burn, excessive thinning, and removal of mature pines. Concomitant with habitat loss and degradation, the distribution of the RCW was substantially altered and populations declined precipitously until the early 1990's. Now found primarily in the coastal plain states of the Southeast, RCWs have been extirpated from New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Missouri, Tennessee, and Kentucky (Jackson 1994; R. Costa, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, personal communication). The remaining population is highly fragmented and estimated at <3% of the species' pre-settlement abundance (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2000).

The decline in RCW habitat and abundance led the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the species as endangered in 1970, and in 1974 the RCW was listed as threatened

by the State of Florida. Although the amount of RCW habitat has not increased measurably since these listings, the aggressive application of several new management techniques (i.e., artificial cavity construction and translocation of birds) has been quite effective at stabilizing or increasing individual populations in Florida and elsewhere. These management activities, coupled with the discovery of “new” RCW populations on previously unsurveyed lands, have yielded an overall increase in RCW abundance over the past 10 years (James 1995, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2000). Currently, the range-wide population of RCWs is estimated at 12,500 individuals (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2000), but only the public lands component of that estimate is based on recent and rigorous survey information. Considering public lands only, RCWs occur on 98 federal and state properties, which collectively support an estimated 10,000 birds (2,800 to 3,600 potential breeding groups) (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2000; Ralph Costa, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, personal communication). Despite these encouraging numbers, it is important to note that most of these RCW populations are small and isolated, or exist in poor quality habitat; only 13 public properties support >275 birds (100 potential breeding groups) and only 21 support >135 birds (50 potential breeding groups) (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2000; Ralph Costa, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, personal communication).

State of Florida listing criteria for Threatened Species require that one of the following general conditions be met: (1) the species has undergone a population decline of 50% over the past three generations, (2) the species is expected to undergo a 50% decline over the next three generations, (3) the extent of occurrence is less than 2,000 square miles, (4) the area occupied is less than 200 square miles, (5) the population numbers less than 2,500 individuals, or (5) a quantitative analysis shows the species has a 20% or higher probability of extinction within five generations. Based on the data summarized above, FWC staff contends the RCW meets none of these criteria, under the assumption current management efforts are continued into the future. FWC staff believe a rigorous analysis of available data during the preparation of the status report for this species will show that it meets one or more of the criteria for listing as a Species of Special Concern, though it is possible the RCW might warrant removal from the state list altogether. However, as this increase is dependent upon continued management of RCWs and their habitat, and because the species’ distribution remains highly fragmented, this reclassification should be accompanied by a comprehensive management plan that outlines how Florida will contribute to the range-wide recovery of the RCW and which safeguards against the species reverting to its former threatened status.

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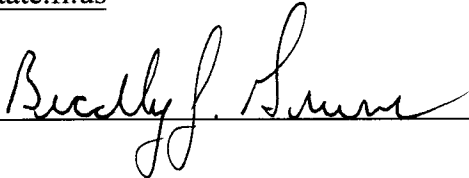
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Petitioner Information

Bradley J. Gruver, Ph.D.
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
620 South Meridian Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1600
(850) 488-3831, SunCom 278-3831
gruverb@gfc.state.fl.us

Signature:  _____

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