

Red-headed Woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*)

NMPIF level: Biodiversity Conservation Concern, Level 1 (BC1)

NMPIF assessment score: 13

NM stewardship responsibility: Low

National PIF status: Watch List

New Mexico BCRs: 16, 18, 35 (mostly in 18)

Primary breeding habitat(s): Middle-elevation Riparian

Other habitats used: Agricultural

Summary of Concern

Red-headed Woodpecker is a widespread cavity nester of the eastern United States, whose range extends into eastern New Mexico. Species populations have shown long-term declines, probably associated with loss of suitable nesting habitat.

Associated Species

Mississippi Kite (SC2), American Kestrel, Yellow-billed Cuckoo (BC1), Northern Flicker, Blue Jay, Eastern Bluebird, Bullock's Oriole (SC2)

Distribution

Red-headed Woodpecker is a widespread eastern species, extending from the Rocky Mountains and central New Mexico east to the Atlantic coast from Florida to southern Canada. It is a permanent resident across much of the east-central United States; summer breeding populations extend farther north and west, to eastern Montana and southern Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Movements from breeding to non-breeding season are erratic, and probably influenced by availability of food (Smith et al. 2000).

In New Mexico, Red-headed Woodpeckers occur in summer mainly in riparian areas and towns on the eastern and northeast plains, and in the Pecos River Valley from Fort Sumner south. Most of the state population occurs in the BCR 18 segment. Although the species invaded the Rio Grande valley in the last century, it has since largely retreated to areas farther east (Ligon 1961, Parmeter et al. 2002).

Ecology and Habitat Requirements

Red-headed Woodpeckers are associated with both deciduous woodlands and open areas with surrounding trees or isolated woodlots. They may occur in orchards, parks and golf courses, and open agricultural country with scattered trees. They are also attracted to burn areas and other areas with standing trees devoid of foliage. Red-headed Woodpeckers prefer woodlands and areas with tall trees with large circumferences, high basal area, and low density of stems in understory. Birds typically forage by flycatching over open areas, more so than any other woodpecker (Conner and Adkisson 1977, Smith et al. 2000). In Wyoming, size of forest fragments and area of nearest streamside habitat were correlated with a higher probability of nesting. Only large forest fragments contained both large-diameter snags favored for nesting, and suitable feeding sites in clearings (Gutzwiller and Anderson 1987).

This species is present in New Mexico from April to October, rare in migration and winter. Breeding begins in May, and the same nest cavity is often re-used from year to year. While nesting, it is territorial and aggressive towards conspecifics and other species. Nests are built in dead trees or in dead portions of live trees, particularly limbs that have lost their bark. Utility poles are also used. Nest trees or poles are typically in open areas with little understory or ground vegetation (Smith et al. 2000). Red-headed Woodpeckers are sometimes displaced from nests by Starlings (Jackson 1976, Ingold 1989). In studies in Wyoming and Colorado, the species primarily nested in large cottonwoods, preferring dead snags or trees with large dead branches (Gutzwiller and Anderson 1987, Sedgwick and Knopf 1990).

Conservation Status

Species Assessment

DISTRIBUTION	2
THREATS	4
GLOBAL POPULATION SIZE	3
LOCAL POPULATION TREND	3
IMPORTANCE OF NEW MEXICO TO BREEDING	1
COMBINED SCORE	13

Red-headed Woodpecker is a Biodiversity Conservation Concern, Level 1 species for New Mexico, with a total assessment score of 13. Its highest vulnerability score is 4, assigned by NMPIF for threats to breeding in New Mexico. Also see discussion under population trend, below. Red-headed Woodpecker is

a national PIF Watch List species and a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2002) national Bird of Conservation Concern.

Population Size

Total population for New Mexico is unknown. PIF estimates a species population of 2,500,000, and that New Mexico holds less than one percent of this population. All estimates of population size in states holding under one percent of the total population should be viewed with caution. Population sizes have fluctuated dramatically over the past century. Reported breeding densities include 2.3 pairs/40 ha in the southeastern United States (Hamel 1992) and <1 to 6–7 pairs/40 ha in upland forest in Oklahoma (Baumgartner and Baumgartner 1992).

Population Trend

BBS data indicate that Red-headed Woodpecker is steadily declining over much of its breeding range, and downward trends have grown sharper since 1980. This species is not well sampled by BBS in New Mexico and state trends are uncertain, but the trend for FWS Region 2 including New Mexico and Oklahoma is sharply negative. Nationally, it receives a highest vulnerability score of 5 from PIF for population trend. BBS data for 1966-2004 are:

	Annual Trend (%)	P-value	Number of Routes
New Mexico	11.9	0.11	4
FWS Region 2	-4.2	0.00	96
Survey-wide	-2.7	0.00	1299

Threats

Red-headed Woodpeckers are declining in urban areas due to removal of dead trees and branches (Pulich 1988), and in rural areas due to loss of nesting habitat to firewood cutting, clear-cutting, agricultural development, and channeling of rivers (Ehrlich et al. 1992, Melcher 1998). Other factors that may negatively affect this species include losses of small orchards, expansion of agriculture, and fire suppression (Smith et al. 2000).

Management Issues and Recommendations

Management for Red-headed Woodpeckers in New Mexico should focus on maintaining large snags for nesting and roosting, with adjacent open areas for flycatching.

NMPIF Recommendations

- Encourage continual regeneration or pole planting of cottonwoods, to maintain established populations as older nest trees become unusable in the future.
- Maintain dead limbs or limit their removal.
- Protect snags in groups.
- Maintain a range of tree heights and diameters within known breeding areas.
- Avoid activities that encourage European Starlings.
- Preserve habitat blocks of greater than 10 ac (4 ha).

Species Conservation Objectives

PIF Objectives

The PIF North American Landbird Conservation Plan places Red-headed Woodpecker in the conservation action category Management. It sets a population objective of doubling the current population over the next 30 years.

NMPIF Objectives

- Maintain at least 30 breeding pairs in the Fort Sumner area.
- Maintain populations of at least 8 breeding pairs at Bosque Grande (Chaves County), Boone's Draw, Tucumcari area, and Corrupa Creek (Union County).
- Increase other breeding populations along riparian corridors such as the Canadian River and Ute Creek in the eastern plains region of New Mexico.

Sources of Information

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