

Spring Cleaning at Okefenokee NWR

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Another spring is upon us and birds at the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge are busy with pre-breeding activities. Just like the spring cleaning that we all try to get done each year, nest building is a chore that takes parent birds a lot of time and energy to complete. In particular, the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker needs to keep their cavities clean and add new wood chips to the bottom in preparation for laying eggs and raising their little ones. During fall and winter, refuge biologists make sure that each red-cockaded woodpecker family has enough cavities to be successful in raising their young. In some cases, artificial cavities have been created in living pine trees to provide places for each member of the family.

Springtime is also a busy time for refuge biologists who spend time checking the condition of each cavity and the start of nesting with an interesting camera device called a “Treetop Peeper”. Mounted on an extendable pole, this device can be raised up as high as 50 feet and biologists can check out the inside of the cavity. Bluebirds, great-crested flycatchers, red-bellied woodpeckers and other cavity nesting birds, along with southern flying squirrels, are often found using these cavities. However, you might be surprised at some of the other critters that use the cavities. Refuge biologists sometimes find rat snakes, tree frogs, walking sticks and wasps staring back at the camera when they check out cavities that the woodpeckers created.

This year is one of the busier years at Okefenokee as biologists assess the impacts of last year’s fires. In the wake of the Bugaboo Scrub and Big Turnaround fires, some of the cavity trees did

not make it through the fire and the red-cockaded woodpeckers have been busy finding replacement trees to excavate their new homes. However, most cavity trees survived and habitat conditions look excellent. This year, red-cockaded woodpecker cavity trees on Billys, Honey, Blackjack, Mitchell, Bugaboo and Number One wilderness islands will all be inspected. This means a lot of walking between 162 trees on the islands plus 288 trees to be checked around the perimeter of the swamp.

April and May are the ideal months for biologists to visit the woodpecker trees to assess activity around the cavities, their condition, repaint the white stripes used to identify the trees, and replace numbered identification tags that may have been burned during the fire. During this two-month period, the red-cockaded woodpeckers find time for courtship and mating while keeping the cavity trees clean. They also excavate small holes in the tree bark around the cavity to let pine resin flow. The sticky pine resin is thought to discourage predators, particularly rat snakes, from climbing to the cavity.

So while you're completing your spring cleaning chores, think about others that are involved in this task and the different ways that refuge biologists and the creatures that they work with keep things neat and tidy too!