



# The Park Connection

Jonathan Dickinson State Park News

NOVEMBER 2020

## *Inside Rx Fire at Jonathan Dickinson State Park*



Learn how and why prescribed fires are conducted at Jonathan Dickinson State Park with this inside look at one of our most valuable resource management practices. This video explores how prescribed fire benefits the plants and animals at JDSP, reduces wildfire threat to the community, and improves recreational opportunities at the park.

Interested in learning more? Visit the [Park Discovery](#) page for additional learning opportunities!



This page features self-guided activities that you can take along on your next park visit and fun, educational resources about our natural world.

What will **you** discover?!



## Birds of a Feather:

### The Brown-headed Nuthatches and Red-cockaded Woodpeckers of JDSP

Decades ago, two very special species of bird disappeared from the JDSP pine flatwoods —the brown-headed nuthatch (BHN) and the red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW). Although the last BHNs were seen in the 1950s and the last RCWs were seen in the early 1980s, the population decline began long before. Logging and fire suppression that occurred on the property before its designation as a state park reduced critical habitat until no birds of either species remained.

Now, park staff is doing all they can to restore these birds' populations. Brown-headed nuthatch reintroduction efforts began with the translocation of 10 birds in 2018 by Jim Cox (Director of Vertebrate Ecology) of Tall Timbers Research Station, and have resulted in at least five new nest attempts and about 12 fledglings. This week, another 10 nuthatches will be translocated to further the success of the existing groups from St. Sebastian River Preserve State Park in Fellsmere (about 70 miles north of JDSP). BHNs were extirpated from the northern Palm Beach County, southern Martin County region. Unlike BHN, RCWs are present in the region but have not been in the park since 1983. The much-anticipated first translocation of red-cockaded woodpeckers into the park occurred on October 23, and included 5 pairs of birds.

These reintroduction efforts are only possible because of the prescribed fire program implemented in the park. Burning the pine forests of JDSP at regular intervals maintains the habitat both species require. Without fire, the understory would become overgrown, making the birds and their nests more vulnerable to predation and increasing the intensity of the next wildfire. More frequent fires are more likely to stay in low vegetation and spare the tall pines required by RCWs. Prescribed fires are used to mimic natural, low intensity wildfires that occur as the weather transitions from the dry to the wet season.

**Red-cockaded woodpeckers excavate cavities in living South Florida slash**

pines, taking advantage of the tree's resin to protect their nest from predators. The birds deliberately create resin flows surrounding their nests to make access more difficult for snakes that would prey upon eggs and nestlings. Brown-headed nuthatches, by contrast, excavate cavities in dead slash pines. Fire also helps to create more snags, offering BHNUs more suitable trees. Cavities abandoned by both birds are sometimes used by other species that are unable to excavate cavities themselves.

In addition to their nesting habits, brown-headed nuthatches and red-cockaded woodpeckers also share an uncommon behavior—cooperative breeding. Cooperative breeding is a strategy whereby some breeding pairs are assisted by one or more "helper" birds, who forgo breeding to help the pair. In cooperative breeding species, the helper birds' contributions include removing waste from the nest and defending it from predators. Maybe the most important helper duty of all, though, is gathering food for the breeders' offspring. In fact, a 2018 study found that BHNU offspring that had breeder birds and a helper bird providing food weighed more and had an increased fledging rate (read the full article [here](#)).

Despite their similarities, these two birds are unique additions to the overall pine flatwoods ecosystem in which they live. We hope that you are as excited as we are to possibly catch a glimpse of a brown-headed nuthatch or red-cockaded woodpecker on your next visit to the park!



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