



First published July 1, 2018

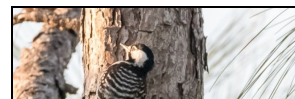


One has to keep one's eyes open to see why the Red-cockaded Woodpecker got its name.

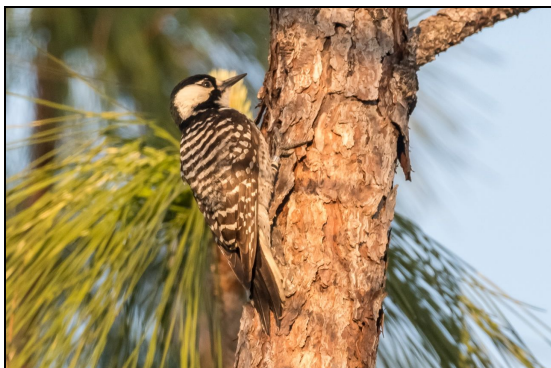
SEARCHING FOR THE "RED COCKADE"

"I have been watching Red-cockaded Woodpeckers and leading birders to see them for over 30 years and have never seen the red-cockade that gives them their name." The speaker was a birding guide we met at Joe Overstreet Landing who lived in the area and specialized in the species. That very morning we had searched the nearby area where the trees were marked with white paint indicating Red-cockaded Woodpecker nesting trees, but had not had any luck finding any.

Our new best friend, the guide, explained that in addition to the white paint, we needed to look for those trees that also had one pink ribbon for "roosting" trees and two pink ribbons for "nesting" trees, and that to see Red-cockaded Woodpeckers we had to be there shortly



after dawn as they stayed in the same area for about an hour before dispersing to search for food. As he spoke I searched my memory for the various Red-cockaded Woodpeckers I had seen in both Florida and Texas in the past and could not recall whether I had ever seen the species red trademark on any of my past sightings. Upon arriving home, I searched all by past photos of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers and found I certainly did not have any photos depicting the tell-tale red cockade feathers.



About two weeks later we returned to the area shortly after dawn and quickly found the specific tree with the single pink ribbon that our guide friend had told us about. Within minutes we found a pair of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. (right) No red feathers anywhere on the birds.



We watched the birds for about 45 minutes and I took over 600 photos during that time, including a number of bursts of 10 to 12 in rapid succession. Neither of us saw any red at any time and considered the trip a failure. When I got home and examined the 600 plus photos, in one of the bursts I found two photos where the bird had flashed the red-cockade. At the beginning of the burst there was no red (left), a fraction of a second later there were two

photos with the bright red feathers, (top) and in the immediate next photos of the same burst they were gone. That was it: two photos out of over 600 showing the red-cockade, and we didn't see the red at the time it was flashed at us. I guess it's true that "cameras don't lie," and it is no wonder that our guide friend has never seen the red in all his years of searching for it.



In our conversation with the guide he informed us of a nesting pair of Red-headed Woodpeckers on Joe Overstreet Road, and gave us the specific location. Flush with the success of finding the Red-cockaded Woodpeckers and while it was still quite early in the day we decided to see if we could find them. Upon arriving at the described Red-headed Woodpecker spot, lo and behold, there they were right in plain view. (right) While watching, one flew to its nest hole (left) and hopefully we



will now know where to find them on future trips. Finally, Joe Overstreet Road is the best place I have ever found anywhere for seeing Eastern Meadowlarks. Shortly after finding the Red-headed Woodpeckers, one flew up on a post and began singing, right by the road. I could not resist taking his portrait and now present it here. (below, right)

What is a "cockade?" I had always assumed it was another name for the same kind of feather that Yankee Doodle stuck in his hat and "called it macaroni." However, that is incorrect. It turns out that a cockade was a badge worn by Revolutionary War soldiers to signify rank. Different colored cockades established the different ranks of officers and soldiers. Yankee Doodle's macaroni was a mocking term used by the British to belittle American colonists who were supposedly trying to be dandier or fancier than they were entitled to be. However, the colonists defiantly considered macaroni feathers as patriotic and wore them proudly. Why the male Red-cockaded Woodpecker doesn't more proudly display his red feathers is a mystery to me. The bird books all describe the red cockade as "virtually invisible," and that certainly seems to be the case. And I was unable to find whether it was a courting or breeding display, threat display, or territorial warning display feature. Perhaps it is something the Woodpecker keeps to himself just to tantalize us birders, kind of like a "now you see it, now you don't" technique that magicians use. Or, keep your eye on the ball. In any event, "you gotta be quick to see it."



Cockade: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cockade; creativecockades.blogspot.com/p/american-cockades.html. Macaroni: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macaroni_\(fashion\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macaroni_(fashion)) .