

# Illinois' First Red-cockaded Woodpecker

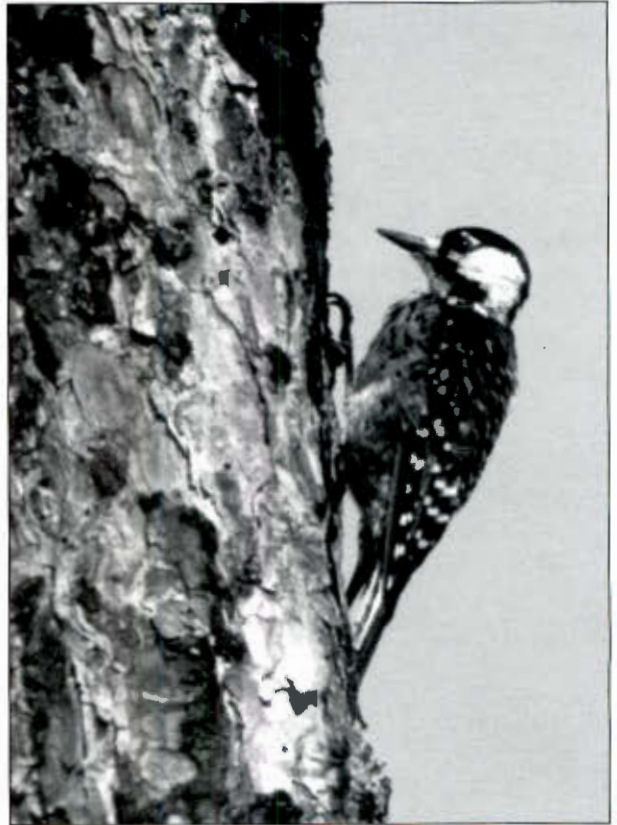
by Paul W. Sweet

The morning of 19 August 2000 started out rather poorly. I had overslept, and finally managed to meet Al Stokie and Robert Erickson at 8:15 a.m. at Illinois Beach State Park in Lake County. They had started the day at Waukegan Beach looking for shorebirds and hadn't seen anything particularly exciting. Illinois Beach was similarly unproductive, with only a few Sanderlings.

On the way back, we had just reached the junction of the Dead River and the Dunes trails when Erickson heard a Rose-breasted Grosbeak. We changed direction to follow the sound, and a cuckoo flew across the trail. Stokie managed to get a good look at it, but it jumped to another tree before Erickson and I could spot it. While we were trying to relocate the cuckoo, a small woodpecker hopped up the base of the trunk and into our field of view. I immediately called it a Downy, without much thought, but a second look proved me wrong. The back appeared barred, and the face showed too much white.

If you were to ask a group of Illinois birders to predict the next few additions to the state's avifauna, all of the suggestions would probably share some traits. They would most likely be widespread, common within their range, and strongly migratory (Walters and Engel 2000). A bird that matched none of those criteria would probably not cross a birder's mind, yet when Erickson said, "Red-Cockaded Woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*)" he showed no excitement in his voice. It was just a general impression. At that point, however, we began looking much more carefully. What had initially appeared to be a very white face turned out to be entirely white auriculars, joining with the white at the side of the neck. The back was narrowly barred white and dark brown. At this point Erickson and I turned to look at each other, and agreed that it certainly looked like a Red-cockaded, a federally endangered species. Stokie, standing slightly behind us, agreed, although there was a certain unhappiness in his tone. He was already imagining the response from the birding community.

However, he was the one who insisted if we were going to report a bird like this, we had better scrutinize every feather, so we followed the bird for 15 minutes, observing it as it foraged low along the



*Red-cockaded Woodpecker. First State Record. 7 September 2000. Illinois Beach State Park. Lake County. Photo by Dennis Oehmke.*

trunks of the black oaks (*Quercus velutina*) growing in that part of the park. We observed the bird for perhaps eight to ten minutes before watching it fly south toward the pines south of the Dead River. During that time we observed the following field marks, taken from my notes, other written descriptions, and photographs.

## Description

The bird was a small woodpecker, between a Hairy and a Downy in size. The crown and nape were solid glossy black, continuing onto the shoulders. The cheeks were fairly bright white. The back edge of the left cheek was sharply bordered by the black nape, but the same border on the right cheek was ragged or mottled. There was a small white mark