

Military Training and Wildlife Conservation Meet at Camp Blanding

by Paul Catlett



Gopher tortoises are a threatened species in Florida. They use their shovel-like front legs to dig burrows in the ground that protect them from fire, weather, and predators. *Courtesy of Camp Blanding*

The Camp Blanding Joint Training Center (CBJTC) is a critical military training resource for the Florida Army National Guard (FLARNG) – as well as other branches of the armed forces – and it serves as a logistical support base during federal and state emergencies. Nestled between Ocala and Osceola National Forests in northeast Florida, CBJTC also connects important, high-quality habitat for a diversity of species.

The installation's 73,000 acres (29,542 hectares) are home to more than three dozen endangered, threatened, and at-risk species, including the red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) and the gopher tortoise (*Gopherus Polyphemus*). Over the years, these two species have benefited from a Natural Resources (NR) program with components that provide continued access to training lands while

protecting the native habitat on which these species depend.

The NR program's active management of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker has fostered a stable population that exceeds the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) recovery goal for the installation. At one time, conservation partners released woodpeckers on CBJTC to supplement its population, which installation biologists closely monitor. Efforts to enhance habitat and create new nest cavities in trees have allowed the population to grow. Stable clusters of the bird now flourish, so much so that the installation has started translocating breeding pairs to other state and federal lands. Bolstering woodpecker populations in neighboring forests helps further the overall recovery of the species, while maintaining mission flexibility for CBJTC.

The NR program also carefully considers military training impacts as they support a thriving gopher tortoise population. The species is listed as threatened in the state and is currently a candidate for federal protection. Through collaborations with the Gopher Tortoise Advisory group, which develops management guidelines and permitting requirements, CBJTC can now move tortoises within the installation to avoid potential conflicts with military training activities. Traditionally, relocating gopher tortoises out of training areas would incur permitting fees and recipient site costs. CBJTC is pursuing an agreement to relocate the animals to Army Compatible Use Buffer lands as well.

To ensure the red-cockaded woodpecker and gopher tortoise populations continue to thrive, the installation conducts regular prescribed

burns to maintain the specific habitat structure on which both species depend. In fact, prescribed burning is a cornerstone of CBJTC's land management. Both red-cockaded woodpeckers and gopher tortoises live in open pinelands that are relatively free of thick shrubs and hardwoods, but abundant with grasses and other non-woody vegetation on the ground. Fire promotes regeneration of the longleaf pine habitat red-cockaded woodpeckers prefer, while clearing undesirable hardwoods that inhibit forest floor vegetation vital to gopher tortoises. The NR program management plans include burn schedules for sensitive areas and incorporate restorative burns into these schedules.

Regular burning also expands training capabilities. Regular training activities involve pyrotechnics and routinely start fires, which are contained. Burning lessens the risk of catastrophic wildfires that are more difficult to contain. The training community benefits from the fire program, as do the native species.

A red-cockaded woodpecker that has been banded. Adults and nestlings must be banded in order to monitor the population and to be able to move birds to other populations. *Courtesy of Camp Blanding*



The NR program has worked closely with partners to maximize shared costs and alternative funding for burning opportunities on CBJTC. According to FLARNG conservation manager Matthew Corby, seeking assistance with prescribed burns – a core element of habitat and training land management – is a high priority for the NR program.

“Aerial burning is a very large component of our acreage requirement each year. If we do not get up in the air and burn large chunks of acreage, we will not meet our objectives,” says Corby. “Through our cooperation with [Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission], the cost of using helicopters – approximately \$7,500 per year – is absorbed into partnership money, so that is a large savings for us.”

Another success in this area includes CBJTC's status as a mentor site for a federal prescribed fire training center. “They bring their firefighters to come burn with us,” says Corby. “They get their tasks accomplished to move forward in their careers, and we get a bit of burning help. We have been able to absorb a lot of our burn costs into partnerships.”

While significant progress has been made in conserving the base's resident red-cockaded woodpeckers and gopher tortoises, CBJTC is now looking forward to expanding its commitment to wildlife conservation.

CBJTC, with support from the USFWS and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, is currently pursuing a new habitat-level Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA). While this type of agreement historically addresses the security of a specific candidate species for federal protection, this CCAA will allow CBJTC to proactively monitor and manage a variety of at-risk

species and their habitats. Proactive management can prevent changes to a species' status under the Endangered Species Act, and potentially future restrictions that may result from those changes. The installation hopes to improve the status of species through the CCAA, to the point where federal protection is not necessary for their survival.

In 2014, the NR program's careful species management earned CBJTC an Army National Guard Environmental Security Award for Natural Resources Conservation, the Secretary of the Army's Natural Resources Environmental Award, and the Secretary of Defense Natural Resources Conservation Award.

Paul Catlett, the environmental program manager at the Camp Blanding Joint Training Center in Starke, Florida, can be reached at paul.l.catlett.nfg@mail.mil or 904-682-3453.

Editor's note: In addition to careful species management, CBJTC is the setting for ground-breaking world health research. The installation collaborates with a variety of organizations, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Center for Disease Control, the World Health Organization, and the U.S. Navy Entomology Center of Excellence to conduct entomological research on topics ranging from insecticide application methods to insect breeding behaviors. Findings from recent disease vector studies will help protect soldiers and communities around the world from insect-borne diseases, and are already helping to fight malaria in Africa.