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Wood Stork *Mycteria americana*

The Wood Stork, or "Wood Ibis" as it was formerly called, is the only stork to regularly occur and breed in the United States. It resides and breeds locally from Sonora, the northern Gulf coast and coastal South Carolina, south to Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, and the Greater Antilles.

Habitat. Because it captures fish by groping with its open bill in water, the stork depends on low water levels to concentrate fish in adequate numbers to feed its young. This specialization results in irregular nesting cycles initiated by adequate water levels. During years of drought, some birds do not breed, while others move to areas with adequate water levels to initiate nesting. Wood Storks can be found feeding in shallow water in both freshwater and coastal wetlands, including tidal creeks and flats, marshes, cypress swamps, ponds, ditches, and flooded fields. The Wood Stork eats fish, small reptiles, amphibians, and mammals, as well as other aquatic organisms.



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Nests are platforms of large sticks in tall cypresses and, less often, in mangroves. Three to 4, rarely 5, white eggs hatch in 28 to 32 days; and the young fledge in 50 to 55 days. Colonies are located on coastal islands and on willow islands in swamps, cypress swamps, impoundments, and other inundated areas.

Seasonal Occurrence. Nesting has been reported throughout the year. In north Florida the Wood Stork is more numerous in summer than in winter, indicating a fall migration to South Florida (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). Spring migration occurs during March and April. Following breeding, adults and young disperse widely and are often noted well outside their normal breeding range.

Status. Historically, the Wood Stork nested almost exclusively in southern Florida, especially in the Corkscrew Swamp, Big Cypress, and Cape Sable area (Kushlan and Frohring 1986; Ogden et al. 1987). At some time between the late 1940s and the late 1960s, the Wood Stork declined as a breeder by more than 90% in south Florida. This decline is directly attributable to loss of wetland habitat and degradation of wetland quality due to the interruption of normal marsh flooding and drying cycles, particularly in the Everglades.

In 1984, the Wood Stork was listed as an Endangered species (USFWS 1984) by the federal government, a status assigned to the bird by the state of Florida several years earlier. Until much of the damaged south Florida ecosystem is restored, the Wood Stork populations in south Florida will remain low and precarious.

Since the mid-1970s numerous colonies of storks have been forming in central and northern Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, where nesting has been relatively successful and the population of Wood Storks over the entire southeast has recovered to about 5,000 to 6,000 pairs (Ogden et al. 1987). In statewide surveys conducted between 1986 and 1989, Runde et al. (1991) estimated 10,000 birds breeding in Florida. This represents a marked decline from the 18,000 found breeding during statewide surveys only 10 years earlier (Nesbitt et al. 1982).

The Wood Stork breeds in colonies scattered throughout the peninsula north to Columbia, Baker, and Duval

counties, but not on the Keys. In the Big Bend region, Wood Storks bred in Leon and Gadsden counties during the Atlas project, establishing the westernmost record in recent years. Although the species no longer breeds in the Panhandle, Howell (1932) mapped a colony in Holmes County. The first Palm Beach County breeding record occurred in 1990 in the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge (Maffei and Jelks 1991).

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Wood Stork

