

Wood Stork

Mycteria americana

In spite of a 40-inch length and a 61-inch wingspan, about twice the width of a normal washing machine, the Wood Stork is relatively light, weighing an average of only 5.3 pounds.

Visitors typically notice the bare dark gray head, the long, gray, heavy and slightly curved bill (juveniles have a cream-colored bill and their heads are more dusky), and the starkly contrasting white body and black flight feathers. Most visitors don't see the pink feet which are brighter when the stork is ready for breeding. Point them out! In flight, storks often soar high in flocks, thousands of feet in the air using thermals, and they can glide for miles.

The Wood Stork's principal diet is fish, crayfish, mollusks, reptiles and amphibians. It feeds entirely by touch (grope-feeding) by walking slowly through the water with its bill partially open. Often one wing may be extended to create a shaded area, an artificial hiding spot for unsuspecting prey, and it often pumps a foot to startle prey into moving.

The stork's bill snaps shut whenever food touches it. The bill snap takes only 0.025 seconds, one of the fastest reaction times known among all vertebrates. Some think this motion is entirely reflexive; however, when storks feed in very tangled vegetation, they do not "snap" at the weeds, which suggests a more calculated feeding technique.

Hunting by touch is not unique, but most other touch hunters like spoonbills, ibises and shorebirds tend to prey on slow movers like worms, crabs and snails. The Wood Stork snapping technique, used to capture fast moving prey, is unique and it is a significant advantage to finding food in very shallow, muddy waters where other birds cannot feed due to sight restrictions.

Wood Storks time their breeding cycle to coincide with the amount of food available, which depends on the

water level. Ideally, the water should be 15-18" deep with prey concentrated in isolated pools. They require the high density of prey to support their typical 440 lbs. of fish/per typical nest (2 adults and 2 fledged chicks) consumed during a breeding season. Nesting may begin as early as November or as late as March, but the earlier the storks nest, the more likely they will be success-



ful; if the young are not fledged by the time summer rains begin, adults abandon the nests because they will be unable to find enough food for the chicks.

The entire breeding cycle takes approximately 130 to 150 days to complete, which means over one third of the year is spent in breeding activities.

Wood Storks nest in colonies at the very tops of the cypress trees. The colonies are found from the Everglades north throughout Florida and along coastal Georgia and South Carolina.

Nests are made of sticks, vines, leaves and Spanish moss in which the female lays two to five eggs, each one or two days apart. Eggs hatch in the order they were laid, in 28 to 32 days.

Chicks are born helpless and unable to fly, weighing about 2 ounces. Competition for food is fierce, so in times of shortage, only the oldest and biggest survive. Week old chicks are fed 15 times a day and grow very rapidly.

Both parents guard the nest and feed the young. Since stork nests are high in the trees and are exposed to the warm sunlight, the parents keep chicks cool by shading them with their wings and by dribbling water over them, which the parents carry in their throats.

By week eight, the young chicks are exercising their wings, and at week nine they typically fledge.

Wood Storks can live for at least 10 years, but mortality rates are high in the first year. Juvenile storks reach sexual maturity in their fourth year.

Storks are generally silent except around the nest. They don't sing, but chicks may hum, hiss and illicit an occasional "bullfrog croak." Adults "cackle" when roosting by making clattering noises with their bills.

The Wood Stork is the only native stork in North America and its numbers have consistently declined since the early 1900's, most likely due to wetland destruction and drainage, flood control and questionable water management policies. It was added to the endangered species list in February, 1984.