

Wood Stork  
(*Mycteria americana*)



Wood Storks are the largest wading birds in North America - between 3 and 4 feet tall and 35 to 45 inches long with a 60 to 65 inch wing span. Males and Females have similar coloring but males are larger. Males weigh 5.5 - 7.3 pounds and females weigh about a pound less. Both have bright white feathers on their body and black tail and flight feathers which are primarily only visible when flying. Their head and neck have grey scaly skin and no feathers. Their large thick bill is black and turned down at the tip and their long legs are black with pinkish beige toes that turn bright pink during breeding season. Juveniles have dull grayish feathers, pale yellow bills and do not lose the feathers on their head and neck until between year one and two.

Although they are large, Wood Storks are not usually aggressive. If threatened, they will fluff out their feathers and walk toward the threat, jabbing and making throaty noises. Adults are voiceless and

only capable of hissing sounds.

Occasionally adults without nests will try to take over the nest of another Wood Stork pair and throw their eggs or young out.

The Wood Stork is the only stork to breed in North America. It is native to the subtropics and tropics of the Americas. Its breeding range extends from coastal South Carolina throughout Florida into coastal Mexico, Central America and areas of Cuba and South America down to northern Argentina. Wood Storks are considered partial migrators. They spend the breeding season in the same breeding colonies year after year but outside of breeding season portions of the Wood Stork population migrates to other areas. The same birds do not necessarily migrate every year and those migrating do not always go to the the

same area each year. During the non breeding season Wood Storks can be found as far west as Mississippi and north into North Carolina. In Mexico Wood Storks breed primarily along the Pacific coast but post breeding they are found along both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts and into Alabama, Texas, Arizona, and California. Migration is thought to depend on the food source and water levels.

Wood Storks require a warm swampy environment. They are social birds who nest in large mixed colonies with egrets and herons. They build their nests in trees growing in standing water or along

the water's edge and forage in wetlands, swamps, ponds, and marches with a 4-12 inch water depth. Wood Storks primarily eat fish and other aquatic invertebrates but will sometimes eat amphibians, snakes, reptiles, nestlings, and even seeds. They frequently forage in groups, wading in a single line and lifting their legs to stir up their prey. As they walk, they sift the water with their open bill, ready to snap it shut and swallow their prey whole. For safety, Wood Storks prefer to forage in open wetlands as opposed to those with a closed canopy.

Wood Storks roost in tree tops over water, preferably water with alligators. They build their nests at varying heights, depending on the trees available in their breeding colony. Some colonies are located in mangroves where the average nest is 10-15 feet high and other colonies are located in cypress swamps where the nests can be 80 feet off the ground and way out on a horizontal limb. Very large trees have been known to hold up to twenty-five nests and some colonies have between 100-500 nests.

Nests are 3-5 feet wide, built from sticks and lined with greenery. Males usually gather the sticks while the female does most of the construction. Building takes only 2 or 3 days but the pair continue to make improvements by adding and rearranging greenery throughout the nesting season. Wood Storks practice serial

monogamy; they stay with the same mate for one breeding season. Although they return to the same breeding colony each year, they may choose different mates each year. Breeding is initiated by a drop in the water level which causes an increase in the density of fish. In south Florida nesting season usually begins in late November. Wood Storks have only one brood a season. They lay one cream-colored egg a day or two apart for up to five eggs. The eggs are incubated by both parents for 27-32 days. During the first week the non incubating parent only forages close by for brief periods. After the first week, the non incubating parent may travel further to forage and gather more nesting material. On warm days, Wood Storks enjoy soaring on the thermal waves, sometimes as far as fifty miles. Nevertheless, the eggs are never left unattended. They hatch in the order in which they were laid. The newly hatched chicks are helpless. They weigh a bit over 2 ounces and are covered in sparse gray down that becomes thick and white within ten days. The chicks are brooded for the first week and at night or in bad weather after that. They are cared for by both parents who feed them by regurgitating fish onto the bottom of the nest. Wood Stork chicks grow rapidly. By three weeks they are half the size of an adult, no longer helpless, and can be left alone for brief periods. By the 6th or 7th week, the plumage on their head and neck has turned gray. By eight weeks

the young start to take short flights but return to the nest to rest/sleep and eat for another few weeks. By the time the chicks have fully fledged they look like an adult without the bald head and neck. They reach sexual maturity at four years but do not usually successfully fledge their own chicks for another year. Wood Storks live 11-18 years in the wild and longer in captivity.

Florida is home to the largest population of Wood Storks in North America. In south Florida the majority of Wood Storks are resident, remaining year round, and are often joined by storks from northern breeding areas during winter. The Audubon Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary once held the largest nesting site in

North America but by 2006, because of development in Southwest, it only hosted an infrequent few nests. In 2024 there were no Wood Stork nests there! Most of those breeding Wood Storks moved inland to Lenore Island and another nearby site.

Globally the Wood Stork is considered a species of least concern because of its wide range but in the United States it is considered threatened, primarily due to loss of wetlands habitats. During the 1960s and 1970s the nest numbers started

to drastically decrease due to agriculture and development. With populations once over 150,000, by the mid 1980's only about 5,000 breeding pairs remained in the U.S. Consequently, in

1984, the Wood Stork was added as endangered to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Endangered Species List. Since then the Wood Stork breeding range has extended into Georgia and South Carolina and the population has doubled. On June 30, 2014, the Wood Stork was down graded from Endangered to Threatened. It still faces major threats from habitat degradation and changes in water levels. In addition to its traditional predators, raccoons, hawks, vultures, alligators, and other Wood Storks, the Wood Stork and its eggs and chicks are also now prey to invasive snakes and caracaras, which are now starting to move into South Florida. Even ecotourism poses a threat. In one study, the nesting success rate of rookeries with boats passing within 66 feet dropped from an average of 0.9 chicks fledging per nest to just 0.1! The Wood Stork is protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Endangered Species Act, and Florida's Endangered and Threatened Species Rule.