

# Wood Stork *Mycteria americana*

## Description

**SIZE:** height to about 4'; wingspan to 5'; weight 4.5 to 6.5 pounds

**BODY:** mainly white with black flight feathers in wings and tail

**HEAD & NECK:** adults bare, scaly skin that appears black from afar giving rise to colloquial names *ironhead*, *flinthead*, *gourdhead*, and *gannet*. Immature's heads are paler with small feathers that make them appear "fuzzy," and have yellowish bills.

**BILL:** long and tapered, round in cross section; curved downward at tip with sharp cutting edges for grasping slippery prey

**LEGS & FEET:** legs blackish; feet turn brighter pink in breeding season

**LIFESPAN:** 10-12 years, but mortality rate high in first year

## Range

Nest from coastal South Carolina through Central and South America to northern Argentina. In the U.S., largest nesting colonies are in the Big Cypress region of Florida, especially the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. Central and northern Florida and southern Georgia also support nesting colonies. After nesting, birds disperse northward into eastern states.

## Breeding

**AGE:** not before the fourth year

**NEST:** male and female both build; prefer tops of large cypress water. Flimsy platform of large sticks, added to continually, slightly depressed. Lined sparsely with fine materials and green leaves. Highly colonial with 5-25 nests per tree.

**PAIRING:** monogamous

**EGGS:** 2 to 4, white to off-white, unmarked, about 2.7"

**INCUBATION PERIOD:** 28-32 days

**SITTING:** male and female share duties equally

**NOTES:** Colonies will skip a breeding season due to lack of food (low water levels at the onset of the season), and will desert eggs and nestlings if prolonged rains occur during dry season (such rains preclude effective foraging because water table does not drop and fish do not become concentrated).

## Feeding

**FOOD:** primarily "rough" fish such as gambusia and sailfin molly but also occasionally small amphibians and reptiles, small birds and mammals, arthropods, and plant material. During nesting period, it takes 440 lbs. of food to feed a family of four.

**METHOD:** Prefer water 15-18" inches deep. Wing flicking is done to startle prey into the stork's open bill, which closes on them in 25 milliseconds, the fastest reflex known in nature. By using the bill-snap reflex, they get food that other waders can't see and do well in high density prey situations. Prey is swallowed with a backward head jerk. Foot-pumping is done in areas with much underwater vegetation (5 times in 2-3 seconds with each step in a direction forward and down).

**AREA:** parents may go to 40 miles from the nest in search of food

**HABITAT:** fresh and brackish waters in cypress domes and strands, wet prairies, scrub cypress, freshwater marshes and sloughs, sawgrass marshes, still pools, along lake and stream margins. As the dry season progresses, feeding areas shift from upland to lowland ponds.

## Chicks

**AT BIRTH:** immobile, downy, eyes open, fed food

**DIET:** regurgitated fish

**FEEDING:** male and female share duties equally

**FLEDGLING PERIOD:** 55-60 days

