

## Profile

# Limpkin

*Aramus guarauna*

Many birders and photographers come to Corkscrew with a specific species in mind. Perhaps it's the Painted Bunting, Wood Stork, or Swallow-tailed Kite. Often, it's the Limpkin.

The Limpkin's range in the United States is limited to freshwater marshes, swamp forests, and shores of rivers, lakes and ponds in Florida. Strays have very rarely wandered further north. It is also found on the coasts of Mexico and Central America, and across most of South America.

The Limpkin is the only member of its taxonomic family. Although it resembles herons and ibises, it is more closely related to rails and cranes.

Limpkins are moderate sized wading birds, 25-29 inches tall with a wingspan of about three and a half feet. The sexes are similar in appearance although the male is slightly larger. Juveniles appear similar to adults but have fewer, thinner white spots.

One of the most distinguishing features is its call – a loud, unmistakable scream, usually in a series of four or more at a time. It is an eerie call, and movie directors sometimes used a tape of the *kree-ow*, *kra-ow* call as jungle background noise in some of the old black-and-white Tarzan movies.

Adult Limpkins also have a loud, single “cluck”; juveniles use a wheezy hiss to call for parents to bring food.

Another identifiable trait is its foraging behavior. Primary food is Apple Snails (*Pomacea spp.*) and freshwater mussels. It jabs and sweeps the bill searching for snails, or hunts visually in clear water. Because the snails are algae eaters, Limpkins frequently hunt at bases of cypress trees or fallen logs where snails will more likely be found.

The Limpkin's bill is uniquely adapted to feeding on Apple Snails. The closed bill has a gap just before the tip that makes the bill act like tweezers. The tip itself is curved slightly to the right so it can be slipped into the right-handed chamber of the snail. When a snail is



caught, the Limpkin takes it to a solid spot of ground or log, turns the snail shell opening upward, cuts through the muscle attachment, and pulls the snail out. Extraction takes about 10 to 20 seconds and the snail shell is rarely broken. A collection of empty snail shells indicates a favorite Limpkin feeding spot.

Territorial males engage in aggressive, ritualistic confrontations that include charging, retreating, and loud calling. Sometimes, there's foot-fighting.

Nesting occurs early February through May. The nest is a platform of sticks, vines, leaves, moss, grass, and

other vegetation and is built in a tremendously wide variety of locations from slowly sinking piles of aquatic vegetation and in dense tangles of vines and branches to between cypress knees, in the tops of Sabal Palms, and in cypress trees as high as 40 feet above the ground.

Five to six eggs are typically laid and incubation takes about 27 days. At hatching, chicks are covered with down and the next day swim, walk, and run.

Chicks follow the adults into the water. Adults will often “park” the chicks on floating vegetation or at a shallow spot and then hunt. When they bring food back to the chicks, only one chick is fed until it's full while the other chicks calmly wait their turns. They learn about snail extraction by watching the adults.

Chicks forage independently at about nine weeks.

Once abundant in Florida, the Limpkin was almost eradicated by humans hunting for food. Conversion of wetlands for agriculture, flood control, and development contributed to the species' decline.

Today the population is fairly stable, although the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission lists the Limpkin as a species of special concern.

Its main threats today are wetland drainage and anything that diminishes Apple Snail abundance. In some areas, thick mats of exotic plants such as water hyacinths prevent Limpkins from finding snails and other food. Dense cattail stands along the shores of rivers and lakes also degrade foraging habitat and access to the mollusk prey.