

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

