



Brunswick Wildlife Wood Storks

The Wood Stork, except for a few vagrant jabirus from Central America that have wandered into Texas, is our only North American stork. It is a tall wading bird with long legs. Its wingspan of five to six feet makes it one of those birds that are hard to misidentify. The White Ibis has black under its wings; however, there are major differences in size and the color and shape of its bill. The ibis is much smaller, with a reddish, decurved bill.

The stork's plumage is white except for black primary and secondary flight feathers and its black tail feathers. The black feathers have a beautiful greenish sheen. A Wood Stork's black flight feathers, like those of Ibis, White Pelican, and other white birds, are stronger and more resistant to wear than white feathers which are the flimsiest feathers of all.

The only North Carolina colony of Wood Storks resides in Sunset Beach. Storks move northward for the summer after breeding and the resulting Sunset Beach population has expanded greatly in the past fifteen years.

Wood Storks may become a permanent resident in our area. A nest was recently discovered in the Waccamaw River floodplain just above the South Carolina state line. Also, at least two storks overwintered at Greenfield Lake and other Wilmington locations this past winter.

Wood Storks eat minnows and small fish such as sunfish. As pictured above, they capture their prey by grope feeding, generally foraging as they walk in water less than a foot deep and probing in the mud with their bill partially opened. Its bill quickly snaps shut when a fish touches it.

Because of their unique feeding method storks require prey to be concentrated in shallow water. Attractive feeding sites are pools in marshes or swamps where fish become concentrated during dry periods. Storks can feed visually; however, tactile feeding allows them to forage in the murky water of wetlands.

Storks are highly colonial. They usually nest in large rookeries and feed in flocks. Nests are mostly located in the upper branches of tall cypress trees, with multiple nests in each tree. Storks often feed in large flocks in shallow water impoundments, ditches, and mud flats.

Estimates of Wood Stork numbers dropped from sixty thousand in the 1930's to twenty thousand in the 1960's. By 1978, there were approximately five thousand mating pairs. In 1984, they were declared endangered under the Endangered Species Act. The population is difficult to estimate, since all adults do not nest each year and they do not breed until they are four years old; however, the current wood stork population estimate is approximately eleven thousand adults.

The decline, especially in the Everglades, is due primarily to the loss of suitable feeding habitat due to land conversion and water management practices. Unfortunately, efforts to restore the Everglades have been on too small of a scale to help the stork's recovery.

Population declines in South Florida have been partly offset by increases in Central and Northern Florida and northward. Populations along a wide band across the northern boundary of their range, from the Florida Panhandle to South Carolina, have averaged over a 1.5 percent increase per year from 1966 to 2003 according to USGS Breeding Bird Surveys.

The easiest way to observe Wood Storks locally in late summer is to find them roosting in trees at the Twin Lakes in Sunset Beach. The best times are at high tide or just before an impending thunderstorm. As the tide subsides, you may find them feeding in shallow water along the causeway.

John Ennis



