



Possible mates since their pink toes in this March photo indicate breeding plumage



North Carolina born and bred

Brunswick Wildlife Brunswick's Wood Stork Experience

Except for a few vagrant jabirus from Central America that have wandered into Texas, our Wood Stork is the only stork found in North American. It is a tall wading bird with long legs and a wingspan of approximately five feet, making hard to misidentify.

The stork's plumage is white except for black primary and secondary flight feathers and its black tail feathers. Because of feather structure, the black is actually dark iridescent green in direct sunlight. If a stork is roosting or foraging with its wings folded, the full extent of the black is hidden.

Wood Storks are soaring birds that fly with their neck stretched out in front and legs extended far beyond its tail. Soaring wings with deep slots are found in storks and other large species such as eagles, vultures, and pelicans. The slots between the primaries at the end of their wings increase lift and reduces turbulence at the tips

Storks, like many other waders, move northward after breeding (called post-breeding dispersal). The resulting Sunset Beach population, until recently the only North Carolina colony, has expanded greatly over the past fifteen years. Thousands of birders across the state have visited to observe these storks, especially those that keep a North Carolina list.

Wood Storks capture prey by tactile feeding, as they walk in water less than a foot deep, probing the mud with their bill partially opened. Their bill quickly snaps shut when a fish touches it. While their main diet is fish, storks also prey on frogs, baby alligators, and crawfish.

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 spells. While storks are able to feed visually; tactile feeding allows them to forage in murky water.

Storks are highly colonial. They usually nest in large rookeries. 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 mudflats.

The Wood Stork is a tropical species that mainly breeds in South America, Central America and the Caribbean. They traditionally bred in South Florida where their numbers dropped from an estimated sixty thousand in the 1930's to twenty thousand in the 1960's. By 1978, there were approximately five thousand mating pairs and they continued to decline until in 1984 they were given protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The total population is difficult to estimate by counting nests. They do not breed until they are four years old and all adults do not nest each year. The current wood stork population estimate is approximately eleven thousand adults.

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

Population declines in South Florida, however, have been partly offset by increases in Central and Northern Florida and beyond. Before the early 1970s, more than 75% of the breeding population nested in colonies in South Florida, in the Everglades south of Lake Okeechobee. By the late 1980s, however, more than 50% nested from central Florida to coastal South Carolina.

Populations along 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.

Now there is a fairly large breeding colony of Wood Storks in Southeastern North Carolina near the South Carolina line. The first nests were found approximately four years ago in the Waccamaw River floodplain. By comparison, the first nests were found in Georgia in 1976. In South Carolina the first nests were found in 1981 and now there are over 2,000.

If you have ever enjoyed watching planes land at an airport, you need to go see these guys. When I was in the Air Force, I worked on the F-111, a swing-wing fighter/bomber that swept its wings back for high speed flight and spread them out to lower airspeed and increase lift for landing.

Wood Storks remind me of the F-111 as they gracefully make their spiraling drop from soaring altitude, wings and feet spread wide to slow airspeed, and then land into the wind ending with a flare. There is always the reminder that birds practiced this millions of years before Orville and Wilbur ate their first corn flake.

The easiest way to observe Wood Storks locally is to find them flying in to roost in trees rimming the Twin Lakes at Sunset Beach. The best times are at high tide or just before an impending thunderstorm. As the tide subsides, they will again disperse to many freshwater swamps and salt marsh areas in Brunswick County to forage and are more difficult to locate.

Our Wood Stork experience is by no means static. During the winter of 2006, for example, a few storks were found in New Hanover County for most of the winter. Two were regulars at Greenfield Lake.

The non-breeding Sunset Beach population has been approximately 200 for the past few years; however, dynamics change from year to year. Due to the severe drought last year, many storks foraged and roosted in the water of the western most lake. Once a late summer phenomenon, this year, at least a dozen storks were seen at Twin Lakes and Sea Trail as early as March...probably because of the nearby rookery.

To some observers, the number of storks roosting at the Twin Lakes seems to be less this summer and bridge construction was thought to be the culprit. More likely, the storks have discovered new freshwater foraging grounds that have perfect water level. Also, they may be roosting at or closer to their new rookery or fanning out to cover more tidal pools. So far this summer, I have seen storks as far north as Oak Island.

If you parents don't grab your kids or you kids don't grab your parents and take the family to see the storks, you will miss one heck of a show!

John Ennis



Yep, they're green!



Another perfect landing atop a nest tree