

Coming home: Wood storks return to nest at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary after two years away

By KATY BISHOP (Contact)

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Woodstorks at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary Wednesday, Mar. 28, 2007. Garrett Hubbard/Staff



Everyday Birdwatching Wood Stork

Mycteria americana

Range: Breeds from South Carolina to Texas, south into Florida and through Caribbean and Central and South America. Lives year round in breeding areas and spreads out farther during rest of year.

What to look for: A huge, white bird with long legs, black flight feathers, a bald, black head and a long, thick bill.

More: Look up other birds on the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Web site: allaboutbirds.org

If you go:

Audubon Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary

When: Open daily 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (must enter boardwalk by 4:30 p.m.)

Where: 375 Sanctuary Road W., Naples (off Immokalee Road, about 15 miles east of Interstate 75)

Cost: \$10 for adults; \$6 college students; \$4 students 6 to 18; free for children under 6

Information: 348-9151, corkscrew.audubon.org

Walk up the steps of the boardwalk's observation platform and your view is suddenly expansive. Puffy white clouds dot the pristine blue sky and saw grass marsh opens before you, ringed by towering bald cypress trees.

There, in the tops of 600-year-old trees, endangered wood storks court, nest and raise their young.

But, for two years, storks didn't nest. These trees at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary were empty, and experts worried that they might never return.

Then, this year, they came home.

Peek through the spotting scope on the observation platform and you'll see a cluster of storks perched on distant trees. They look prehistoric: Round white bodies and huge black-trimmed wings. A bald, black head and a long, thick bill.

Along the horizon to the southwest, you can see the line where loggers stopped their cypress-cutting enterprise, decades ago. They left this old forest and marsh intact, along with the rest of the 13,000-acre sanctuary. You might see wood storks fishing along roadside canals or golf course ponds, but if you want to see dozens nesting, take the trip to Corkscrew.

On this morning in early January, some storks are courting or building nests, while others sit still, incubating eggs. Then, one bird rises on a branch, opens its wings and launches into the air. A few flaps, and it coasts effortlessly. Wheeling and turning, riding rising warm-air currents up into the sky.

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Visitors dot the preserve's boardwalk, meandering and pausing to peer into the forest's depths at birds, insects, plants.

The sanctuary's assistant director, Jason Lauritsen, walks along at a brisk pace, quietly passing visitors. When the boardwalk splits into two — a short, one-mile loop on the right or the longer, 2.25-mile path — he takes the longer route.

You have to take the long way if you want to see the storks.

As he walks, shoes vibrating the wooden walkway, Lauritsen talks about the storks, which Corkscrew tracks meticulously every year and he has been studying there since 2001.

He went up in a plane earlier in the week and spotted more than 60 nests with eggs, along with another 300 or so birds courting and or building nests.

Lauritsen's small plane got into one of the circling thermal updrafts that the birds use to glide, and flew along beside the storks for a while. Riding those air currents, wood storks rise more than 2,000 feet without a lot of flapping.

"They're remarkable soaring birds," Lauritsen says. "They'll fly in kettles, which are those winds. They're called that for a kettle on the stove, because the birds look like carrots and celery swirling in a kettle when you stir it around."

This Southwest Florida swamp is home to the largest wood stork nesting area in the United States, he adds. It's always been an unstable colony, but 2007 and 2008 were the first recorded back to back years without a single nest.

He was worried.

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Wood storks need water, but only at the right times. They also need fish. A lot of fish. And alligators.

Nesting depends on the wet and dry seasons working in perfect harmony, Lauritsen says, climbing the steps to the marsh observation tower. The summer months have to be rainy, so the small fish breed and, come fall, the storks have a lot to eat.

The birds return to Southwest Florida in October, and before they nest, they feed along the edges of ponds and golf courses.

When the dry season starts, water starts to concentrate in swampy areas like Corkscrew and fish are more concentrated and easier for the storks to catch. This is important, because stork chicks, once they hatch, are very demanding.

Each chick eats about 440 pounds of fish from the time it hatches to when it leaves the nest, and each pair of storks usually raises two chicks, and sometimes three or four.

The water needs to be deep enough to provide enough food, but also shallow enough — ideally between 2 inches and 16 inches — for the adults to hunt efficiently for their chicks.

While the adults do all the work, their chicks stay in the nest in the 80- to 100-foot-tall bald cypress trees. The parents depend on alligators to keep raccoons and other predators from climbing the nest and eating eggs or young chicks.

And, to add another variable, the chicks have to leave the nest before the summer rains return. Once the rains come the water is less concentrated, the fish spread out and it's impossible for the adults to feed their young.

Lauritsen spotted the first nest at Corkscrew on Dec. 14, with three eggs. Since the birds lay about an egg a day, he estimates that they started nesting around Dec. 12.

"This is a relatively early nesting season, and that's very good news because it allows them enough time to raise their young before the summer rains come," says Ed Carlson, Corkscrew executive director. "It's great timing."

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Before the 1970s, 70 percent of U.S. wood storks nested south of Lake Okeechobee, Lauritsen says. Now it's about 27 percent, when it rains the right amount. Meanwhile, colonies in Georgia and South Carolina have been growing in recent years.

Corkscrew is, and always has been, an unstable colony — even though it is the largest in the country. The birds depend on a complicated natural balance, and it's easily upset by drought — especially since they've lost a lot of wetland habitat.

In the past, storks did OK in dry years, but now that they've lost wetlands throughout Florida, they don't do well when it doesn't rain enough. In drought years, wood storks nest late, or not at all, and far fewer chicks survive.

That's what happened in 2007 and 2008, when Southwest Florida experienced two years of drought, Lauritsen says. But in 2007 the drought wasn't as severe, and Lauritsen suspects that if the storks had access to as much wetland as they did historically, they might have reproduced.

This year, Corkscrew recorded its highest water level ever after Tropical Storm Fay in mid-August, and now, the storks are nesting again.

Since the sanctuary started tracking nests in 1958, there have been eight years without any nests, and other years when thousands of young storks took flight. Overall, the numbers have decreased at Corkscrew since 1958.

Statewide, there were about 14,000 stork pairs nesting in the 1930s, and now, there are a little more than 2,000 nesting pairs.

"Wood storks have lost so much wetland, so much foraging habitat, that there's not a consistent, reliable food source for them in Southwest Florida from November to June," Lauritsen says.

And though they nest at Corkscrew, the birds travel far to eat. They'll often fly nearly 20 miles in search of food, and sometime's they'll go as far as 50 miles away.

"They are a handy gauge to assess the health of their wetlands," Lauritsen says, standing on the observation platform after peering into the scope to look at the nests. "They tell you about the availability of foraging, the wet-

dry cycle and the status of the flat landscape of South Florida. It's pretty obvious that we've done something wrong."

Other organisms have been stressed by loss of wetlands, but these are great, big, white birds that nest in the tops of trees.

They're easy to track.

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If you visit Corkscrew, you'll be able to peek through the scope and watch them nesting across the marsh.

You won't hear them call, because adults are mute, but you might see males attempting to impress potential mates by clacking their bills, flapping their wings and grabbing at twigs.

Later in the spring, the wood storks come closer to the sanctuary's boardwalk to feed, young and old. That's when you might see them dipping their 16-inch-long bill into the water and snapping it quickly shut when they feel their prey.

If you want to see them nesting, visit now and look through that scope at the marsh observation platform. Go soon, Lauritsen says, before the bald cypress trees fill out in mid-February and the nests are harder to see. And, if you look up into the air, you might just see the one soaring effortlessly over the saw grass marsh.