

Woodstorks Move in on Cumberland Island

By Susan P. Bratton

The disappearance of the majority of the endangered wood stork (*Mycteria americana*) population has been one of the most serious threats to the integrity of the avifauna of Everglades National Park. The storks have not died or ceased to reproduce, but have moved north, presumably to habitats where hydrologic conditions favor the wood storks' style of foraging. Ironically, a wading bird survey recently completed on Cumberland Island National Seashore, Georgia, indicates wood storks are now resident in the Cumberland Sound area and in 1986 and 1987, actually attempted to nest on Cumberland Island. The survey, originally funded by the Department of Defense to evaluate biological impacts of deep dredging for the nearby Kings

Bay Naval Submarine Base, was intended to determine which species of wading birds were using Cumberland's salt marshes at the onset of construction dredging activities.

In the late 1970s, Ron Odum, of the State of Georgia Department of Natural Resources, reported two wood stork colonies in coastal Georgia counties near Cumberland Island National Seashore. Prior to that time wood stork sightings on the coast of Georgia were sporadic, although storks may have been resident in nearby Okefenokee Swamp. In 1986, an Audubon aerial census located a large colony (250 pairs) at Dover Bluff, on the mainland to the north of Cumberland. Park staff verified wood storks nesting at Heron Pond on Cumberland Island in 1986, but did not determine the survivorship of young storks.

In 1987, the wading bird survey and a "wood stork watch" documented a second year of nesting at Heron Pond and found wood storks were roosting and foraging on Cumberland Island at all four seasons. As many as 55 storks were observed at the Heron Pond at one time. Since 1987 was a drought year, the pond went dry in May (alligators were seen leaving the area) and the wood storks abandoned the nesting effort. They did not attempt to nest at the pond in 1988.

Aside from observations of roosting and nesting, numerous sightings were made of wood storks foraging or resting in brackish ponds, in fresh water at Lake Whitney, or in tidal creeks. The total of 179 sightings for 1988 was much higher than expected. The wading bird survey found wood storks foraging in salt water, particularly at low to medium incoming tides. Salt water foraging is considered very rare in south Florida, perhaps due to the lower tidal amplitude. In south Georgia, small fish "run up" the estuaries as the tide comes in.

In summer 1988, aerial overflights found wood storks foraging regularly in both fresh and salt water habitats in the Cumberland Sound area. A series of two-hour flights flown over a standardized route in late September, 1988, counted 109 to 411 storks, with an average of 303 per flight. These data suggest that the number of endangered wood storks using the Cumberland Sound and the two islands to the north of it may exceed 500 birds (the total wood stork population in the U.S. is about 10,000 birds). Ground survey in 1988 located two additional roosting areas on Cumberland Island – one on the marsh shoreline near Plum Orchard mansion and one at Willow Pond, in the Sweetwater Lakes complex in the interior of the island.

This research and monitoring effort found far more wood stork activity on and near Cumberland Island than originally expected and suggests protection of wood stork foraging and roosting sites should become a key management concern for a park area outside of south Florida. The aerial surveys found more groups of storks near salt water habitats, but relative to their very limited area in the region, fresh water ponds and lakes were very heavily used by the storks. These sites are very prone to hydrologic changes and human induced disturbance. Priorities for Cumberland Island National Seashore are to protect tidal creeks used for foraging and to protect interior wetlands, such as Heron Pond or the South End Ponds, where small colonies of wood storks may roost, nest or forage.

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