
PRESS RELEASE

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Audubon of Florida Urges Caution on Wood Stork Status

Fifty Years of Data Submitted to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Naples, Florida – On November 22, Audubon of Florida submitted comments and research data to support its recommendation to address significant research questions and concerns as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) reviews the current Wood Stork listing as Endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act. These data and recommendations come in response to a request from the Service to assist in their current review of the Wood Stork's status, required by a recent petition from the Florida Homebuilders Association to downlist the species to Threatened. The Wood Stork was placed on the Endangered Species list as Endangered in 1984 because of dwindling population and habitat in its southeastern U.S. range. In 2007, the Service completed a preliminary review which indicated increased stork population to the north may warrant downlisting to Threatened.

Audubon owns and manages the 13,000 acre Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary which has for over 50 years hosted the nation's largest nesting rookery for Wood Storks. Audubon scientists have been monitoring annual nesting and habitat conditions since 1958, as well as conducting research, currently led by assistant Sanctuary director and Wood Stork biologist, Jason Lauritsen. **These data and research results indicate a loss of critical shallow foraging wetlands of up to 80% in the 30 kilometer radius of core foraging area around the Corkscrew rookery. This has resulted in reductions of nesting productivity from about 4,500 fledges average each year in the 1960's, to around 950 now.**

These same wetland losses have occurred, and continue to occur across the greater Everglades region due to state and federal regulatory inadequacies, threatening the South Florida population of storks. Audubon is working with permitting agencies to correct these problems, centering on tracking the value of shallow foraging wetlands, but results are still pending.

According to Lauritsen, "Wood Storks are a key indicator species for progress on Everglades Restoration, and their regional status also figures heavily in whether the species can ultimately recover."

These Corkscrew and Everglades region threats are combined with uncertainty about the future sustainability of newer and numerous smaller rookeries of Wood Storks expanding north from the historic South Florida population base. Because many of these colonies are located amongst coastal marshes in Georgia and South Carolina, sea level rise and climate change pose substantial risks to continued population growth and sustainability. There are also important questions about how dependent these new northern stork colonies are on South Florida habitats in the winter. Also, the Service must ascertain the levels of long term protection for wetland habitats around these northern colonies.

“No petition to reduce protections for the Wood Stork can proceed without addressing these critical questions on the sustainability of recent population gains in the north, plus restoring the historic South Florida base for these birds,” said Julie Wraithmell, Director of Wildlife Conservation for Audubon of Florida.

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