

THE HEAT IS ON

Species feeling the effects of climate change



Wood Stork

Mycteria americana

Region:

Southeast

Area affected:

South Florida

Climatic change:

Precipitation change

Impact:

Loss of food source

ABOUT THIS SPECIES

Measuring 40 inches tall with a five-foot wingspan, wood storks are one of the largest wading birds in North America. They are also a notable Endangered Species Act success story. Listed as “endangered” in 1984 after loss of wetland habitat caused an 85 percent drop in nesting populations over the 20th century, by 2014 the birds had rebounded and were downlisted to “threatened.” In the United States, wood storks are found in coastal regions in the Southeast and throughout Florida. Populations also range across the Gulf Coast regions of Mexico and Central America and throughout much of South America. Wood storks are colonial birds that feed in large flocks and cluster their nests in groups, or “rookeries,” built in clumps of large cypress or mangrove trees. They use their long, slightly curved bills, which can snap shut on prey in a fraction of a second, to forage in shallow wetlands for small fish.

DESCRIPTION OF IMPACT

Wood storks depend on a specific set of seasonally fluctuating wetland conditions that provide their prey: high water periods during which fish populations increase, alternating with drier periods when the water level drops to six to 10 inches deep, concentrating fish at depths storks can reach with their bills. Raising a pair of stork chicks requires about 400 pounds of fish, so the birds depend on the seasonal dry period, when fish are easier to catch, to correspond with the stork nesting season, which runs from October to March. This pattern has been broken in South Florida in recent years, and wood stork numbers may be declining as a result. In autumn 2014, for instance, the months leading up to the breeding season were dry rather than wet, so fish populations were smaller than usual. Then in spring 2015, conditions abruptly shifted to an unusually wet period, making available fish more difficult to catch. **Consequently, in 2015 wood stork nesting was down 36 percent from the 10-year average.** In 2016, an extremely wet winter left many of the breeding areas so flooded that foraging became difficult, and biologists reported finding adult storks that apparently starved to death.

References

Cook, M.I. (ed.). 2016. South Florida Wading Bird Report. Vol. 21. http://fl.audubon.org/sites/default/files/documents/sfwbr_2015_final.pdf

Gillis, C. 2016. Wood storks may be starving due to high water. *WTSP News-Press*. February 9. <http://www.wtsp.com/story/news/2016/02/09/wood-storks-may-starving-due-high-water/80074790/>

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Wood Stork (*Mycteria Americana*) (species profile). <http://ecos.fws.gov/ecp0/profile/speciesProfile?slid=8477>



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