



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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WOOD STORK POPULATIONS IN SEVERAL SOUTHEAST STATES ADDED TO ENDANGERED SPECIES LIST

The Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has added the U.S. breeding population of the wood stork, Mycetia americana, found in the states of Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and Alabama, to the endangered species list, Service Director Robert A. Jantzen announced. The action follows an extensive review of available information concerning the species and a determination by the Service that breeding populations of the birds are continuing to decline.

Estimates indicate the breeding populations, located mainly in peninsular Florida, have declined by 75 percent since the 1930's. Much of the decline can be attributed to human manipulation of water tables through construction of drainage canals, levees, and lumbering of large cypress trees that offer nesting habitat. The nesting population of wood storks declined from more than 20,000 pairs during the 1930's to approximately 10,000 by 1960. Since 1978, fewer than 5,000 pairs have bred each year.

The wood stork, also commonly known as the wood ibis, is the only stork native to the United States and a cousin of the white stork of Europe and Asia known for its legendary, but mythical, role in human obstetrics. Adult wood storks stand over 3 feet tall with a five foot wingspans. The breeding and feeding habits of this white wading bird are closely linked to wetlands,

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primarily shallow ponds and cypress-mangrove swamps. The mainstay of the stork's diet is small fish, and an entire flock of the birds will often descend on a small pond or section of swamp to feed by groping the muddy bottom with their long, sensitive beaks.

Feeding habits depend upon a period of high water that causes an increase in the number of fish, followed by a drying period that concentrates the fish in a smaller area and makes them easier prey for the feeding flocks of birds. The drying period, when feeding is easier, triggers the storks' breeding season which lasts from November to April or May. During these months the birds congregate in colonial nesting or rookery sites mainly found in mangrove and cypress swamps. The rest of the year they can be found throughout most of the Southeast.

The location of rookery sites may shift according to the amount of rainfall, depth of water, and other such variables. This shifting, as well as the fact the birds spread far and wide when not breeding, prompted the Service to not recommend areas of critical habitat for the stork.

As a result of listing the wood stork as an endangered species, the Fish and Wildlife Service will work with State wildlife agencies and South Florida water management districts to curb the species' decline. The ruling does not affect nonbreeding populations of wood storks found west of Alabama at times.

The wood stork is the 247th species found in the U.S. to be added to the endangered species list.