

WOOD STORK NESTING IN NORTH FLORIDA

Stephen A. Nesbitt

The number of Wood Storks (*Mycteria americana*) nesting in Florida north of Marion County is poorly documented. Pearson (1892) identified two colonies in that part of Florida, one in a cypress swamp 17 miles southwest of Archer (Levy Co.) and the other, which contained hundreds of birds, 20 miles from New Troy. Baynard (1913) stated that in 1906 about 1,500 pairs bred in a cypress swamp in northeastern Alachua County, but that the colony was shot out soon thereafter. Bent (1916) listed three north Florida nesting locations: 1) at Amelia Island, 2) in an unspecified site on the St. Johns River, and 3) at St. Augustine. In his book, *Florida Bird Life*, Howell (1932) stated, "The species was said to be breeding commonly at Chipley, in northwestern Florida (Washington County) in 1904." Also, in Figure 10 (page 114) he showed a breeding location near Tallahassee, but the text made no reference to it. It is interesting that Ogden (1971) related an observation by M. Anderson and H. Cooper as follows: "One or more Wood Storks, May 15, flying toward the St. Marks River (south [actually southeast] of Tallahassee) carrying nesting material." Perhaps a correlation exists between these two reported nesting locations.

During 1972 I knew of four locations of nesting Wood Storks in Florida north of Marion County. The most southern was on River Styx north of Orange Lake in Alachua County (R.21 3., T. 11 S.). This colony has also been referred to as "Micanopy" (Ogden, 1971-72). On 4 May 1972 about 200 adults were seen there, and 24 flightless young were present on 20 June. This colony has been active for several years and checked regularly by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission for the past 4 years.

On 21 April, twelve pairs of Wood Storks were seen building nests in a swamp on the northeast side of Newnans Lake in Alachua County (R. 21 E., T. 9 S.). On 30 June, about 20 flightless young were present. This is probably the first year of activity for this colony which may be a "satellite" of the larger and more vigorous River Styx colony 14 miles to the southeast.

Another Wood Stork nesting site is located between Guano and Tolomato Rivers in St. Johns County, not far from St. Augustine (R. 29 E., T. 6 S.). An aerial inspection on 30 June revealed 138 birds, 25 of which were young of the year. This possibly is the St. Augustine rookery mentioned by Bent. Whether or not this is the case, the colony has been active in its present location since the early 1930's, according to Samuel A. Grimes (pers. comm.), who has periodically observed it for 40 years. To his knowledge, the nesting population has not changed significantly during that time.

The fourth Wood Stork colony, in eastern Duval County, is within 4

miles of Jacksonville Beach (R. 28 E., T. 3 S.). On 30 May nest construction was in the later stages, and on 16 August about 50 young were present. This rookery has been active for approximately 15 years (Grimes, pers. comm.).

Nests at all 4 sites were in the tops of Bald Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*). In addition to the regularly associated water birds, the Dee Dot Ranch colony was near a vulture roost used by 200 or more birds, mostly Black Vultures (*Coragyps atratus*).

The total number of Wood Storks fledged in north Florida is small compared to those in the remainder of the state — probably about 200 birds in the north compared to nearly 1,000 in the rest of Florida in 1972. (Ogden, 1972), but there is comfort in the knowledge that this small part of the Florida (and U.S.) Wood Stork population is far removed, at least geographically, from the impact of civilization bearing down on the wild-life environment in southern Florida. The state of Florida should consider purchasing any of these colonies which are used consistently. Two of the colonies, River Styx and Newnans Lake, are on lands owned mostly by Owens-Illinois, Inc., and/or Franklin Lumber Company. The River Styx colony has been designated as a Florida Audubon Society Wildlife Sanctuary under the name "Micanopy Cypress." The Guano River colony exists on land owned by Stockton, Whattley, Davin and Company of Jacksonville but is leased by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission for a Game Management Area. Dee Dot Ranch is owned by J.E. Davis of Jacksonville.

I am grateful to Lovett E. Williams, Jr. for reviewing early drafts of this manuscript.

LITERATURE CITED

- Baynard, Oscar E. 1913. Breeding birds of Alachua County, Florida. *Auk*. 30: 240-247.
- Bent, A.C. 1926. *Life Histories of North American Marsh Birds*. U.S. Nat'l Mus. Bull. no 135, Washington, D.C. 392pp.
- Howell, A.H. 1932. *Florida Bird Life*. Coward-McCann, New York, 579pp.
- Ogden, J.C. 1971. The nesting season: Florida Region. *American Birds*. 25(5): 846-851.
- , 1972. The nesting season: Florida Region. *American Birds*. 26(5): 847-852.
- Pearson, G.T. 1892. The ibises of Ledwith Lake, Florida. *Oologist*. 9(4): 99-100.
- Wildlife Research Projects, Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, 2606 N.E. 17th Terrace, Gainesville, FL 32601.

The wood storks, a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act, was drawn to the higher than normal water levels found at the sanctuary that were perfect for nesting, fishing, and raising young. "The rains masked the damage that we've done for the past 70 years," said Lauritsen. "It's the silver lining." (Photo: Luke Franke/Naples Daily News). "Environmental conditions are forcing them further east (in Florida) and north (to Georgia and South Carolina)." Wood storks serve as something of a canary in a coal mine for Southwest Florida's swamps — an indicator of the ecosystem's integrity and health, Clem said. "They're our Goldilocks," Clem said. "They're sensitive and they have more specific requirements for feeding and nesting."