



## Mexican Eagles By Susan Heath

Have you seen a Mexican Eagle? If you live along the Texas coast chances are you have, even if you didn't realize it. "Mexican Eagle" is a colloquial name for the Crested Caracara, which is a common bird along the coast and the south Texas brush country. They are less common in oaks and prairies area of the state, and not present at all in the west or panhandle. Their range is mostly in Mexico and Central America so we are lucky to have them here in Texas. The only other U.S. states with caracaras are Arizona and Florida.

Caracaras look like hawks with a sharp bill and talons but they behave more like a vulture by feasting on carrion. In fact, they are actually a tropical falcon as their range implies. Although they are most easily seen eating roadkill with vultures, they will also take live prey. They are quite omnivorous in their diet and will wade in shallow water to catch fish, dig up turtle eggs with their strong feet, or follow farm tractors catching escaping animals. Often they fall back on following vultures to carcasses. They can't open up a carcass by themselves though and must wait for a vulture or other raptor to do that for them.

The Caracara's body and wings are black but they are easy to recognize with a black cap and orange face set off by a white neck. Their legs are orange too and they are quite a handsome bird if you take the time to notice. They often perch on power poles or tree tops and that's the easiest place to find them.

Adult pairs will stay together for years and sometimes defend their territory year-round. They nest during the winter mostly in trees and weave their nests of twigs and leaves. They are the only falcon that collects material to build their own nest and will reuse a nest, refurbishing it each time resulting in a quite large nest. Other falcons use an old nest from another species or simply lay their eggs in appropriate habitat. Caracaras lay one to four eggs and both male and female incubate them for about 30 days. The chicks are covered with down when they hatch and it takes seven to eight weeks before they can fly.

Although breeding adults don't show much social behavior with other adults, family groups sometimes stay together for months. The young birds are brown and are easy to recognize as such when they are with adults. The young birds typically leave their parents around six months of age and join other immature birds and non-breeding adults that can form large flocks. This gives them a competitive advantage over vultures when a carcass is found and also provides them social learning experiences. Perhaps they even find a mate in these large communal flocks which forage and roost together. Once a pair bond is established though, the young couple moves off on their own to establish their territory.

Crested Caracaras are a special bird in the Texas avifauna. There's really no other bird like them in the U.S. and their antics can be quite fun to watch. I've seen a single caracara fending off a whole flock of vultures at deer carcass. That's one tough bird!