

Where To See Wood Storks

By Celeste Silling

One of the most interesting birds you can see in our area right now is the Wood Stork. Wood Storks are very rare, as they can only be found in a select few areas in the United States. They are the only native stork in North America, and can only be found in Southern swamps.

Usually, if a birder wanted to see this bird, they would have to seek these storks out in the wetlands of Florida, Georgia, or South Carolina. Or they could head all the way down to South America, where these storks live year-round. But unbeknownst to most birders (and the general public) Texas has a few stealthy stork visitors every summer.

We never know exactly when the Wood Storks will appear, but perhaps your best chance to see them in our area would be to go to Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge, San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge, or Brazos Bend State Park in August. These are wetlands where the storks have been seen in previous years. Hopefully we will have enough rain this year that the wetlands will be wet and the storks will return. If you decide to visit one of these refuges, be sure to drive slowly, be quiet, and keep an eye out for giant white birds.

The Wood Stork is not easily mistaken for an ibis, heron, pelican or any other big white bird. Perhaps its most distinguishing characteristics are its huge size (over 3 feet tall), its enormous curved bill, its bald head and the fact that it looks like a dinosaur in a feather jacket. There's no other bird quite like it in our swamps. And while this animal might not be conventionally attractive, it is certainly very fun to look at!

Wood Storks are often seen hunting in the wetlands, standing in the water with their heads down looking for fish or invertebrates. These are social birds, so you will usually see them in flocks and colonies. They don't make much noise in my experience, except for the occasional dull croak or bill clatter.

At their nesting grounds, Wood Storks create huge nests (3-5 feet wide) in mangroves, oaks, and cypress swamps. They have only one brood, and stay with their mate for only one breeding season. This is despite the myth that storks mate for life.

There are actually several myths from all around the world about this bird. In American culture, it is well-known that storks deliver babies in their beaks to expecting parents. This story might have originated from Greek mythology, in which storks attempted to steal babies. Storks also appear in Egyptian, German, Israeli, Chinese, and other mythologies, although they aren't always associated with human babies.

While our Wood Storks aren't really mythological creatures, they are certainly local legends! If you find yourself wanting to go on a stork safari this summer, head to your local wildlife refuge and have a look. These birds are worth it!

Photo by Paul Brennan

Caption: Wood Stork and Roseate Spoonbill