

**A NEW LONGEVITY RECORD FOR THE NORTHERN
CARACARA (*Caracara cheriway*) IN FLORIDA**

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Raptors, at least those with larger body mass, are known to be relatively long-lived, but obtaining longevity records for wild birds is difficult unless individuals are marked or can be tracked for multiple years. Here we report a resighting that establishes a longevity record for the Northern Caracara (*Caracara cheriway*, hereafter caracara). This raptor occurs in Florida as an isolated and resident population in the south-central region (Morrison and Dwyer 2012). In this region, caracaras are most often found nesting on cattle ranches, which typically include large acreages of improved pastures, open grasslands that are intensely managed as forage for cattle (Morrison and Humphrey 2001). Breeding pairs of caracaras exhibit strong fidelity to a nest site and territory, even to a nest tree (Morrison 1999).

During the mid-1990s and again in the mid-2000s, this population was intensively studied, and over 500 caracaras, both adults and nestlings, were marked. Resighting and recovery information over the years has allowed estimation of annual survival for sub-adults (Dwyer et al. 2012) and for adults and juveniles (Morrison 2003). Adult annual survival is relatively high, 0.88 for males and 0.91 for females (Morrison 2003).

On 7 March 1994, JLM and SMM banded an adult breeding caracara at its nest (N 27° 28', W 85° 01') along NW 240th St., in northern Okeechobee County, Florida. This bird was sexed as male, using DNA obtained from a blood sample. JLM and SMM monitored nesting success in this territory, through 2000. During these 7 years, this male remained in this territory and, with its mate, successfully fledged a total of 11 young.

On 15 March 2015, BKS came upon a banded adult caracara feeding on road kill within 200 m of the site where the adult male caracara was banded in 1994. BKS observed the caracara for several minutes and watched it take food to a cabbage palm (*Sabal palmetto*), which presumably contained the caracara's nest. The caracara returned to the road kill within a few minutes, and at this time, BKS was able to obtain photographs of the caracara. On 16 March 2015, BKS submitted a banding report, along with several photographs showing the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) band, to the USGS Bird Banding Laboratory (BBL). Verification of this caracara's identity was made on 16 March 2015, when the BBL submitted the photographs to JLM, who confirmed the caracara's identity using numbers visible on the USFWS band. Since caracaras attain adult plumage at a minimum of 3 years of age (Nemeth and Morrison 2002), this male was at least 3 years old when it was banded; thus, when photographed in March 2015, it was at least 24 years old.

Previous longevity records for wild caracaras have been reported as 9 years (Klimkiewicz and Fitcher 1989) and 22 years (J. Layne, unpubl. data). No details are available for these records although they presumably are resightings of marked individuals. The lifespan of captive caracaras has been recorded as 15 years (Bent 1938),

21 years (J. Layne, unpubl. data), and 37 years (Newton 1979). For comparison, longevity records for other raptors resident in Florida include Snail Kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*), 14 years, and Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*), 22 years (Lutmerding 2015).

Florida's population of the Northern Caracara is federally and state listed as Threatened. Perhaps as few as 500 nesting pairs may remain in the state, and the population is believed to be in decline because of ongoing loss of its favored pasture- and grassland habitats (Morrison and Humphrey 2001). All available habitat suitable for nesting appears to be occupied, and a large population of non-breeding floaters is continually searching for and evaluating prospective territories and breeding opportunities (Dwyer et al. 2013). The landscape in this male caracara's territory is typical of caracara nesting habitat and includes improved pasture, scattered cabbage palms and live oaks (*Quercus virginiana*), and seasonally flooded wetlands. This landscape has not changed since this caracara was banded in 1994, so it is likely that this individual has remained there and attempted nesting, annually, since it was banded.

Individual birds that live longest typically produce more offspring over their lifetimes, thereby have a greater probability of producing recruits and thus influencing long-term population persistence (Newton 1985, Espie and Oliphant 2000, Herényi et al. 2012). A management strategy focused on retaining suitable nesting habitat will likely benefit Florida's caracara population by enhancing survival and reproductive success of breeding individuals. However, the strong site fidelity and sedentary behavior typical of this species, combined with a long lifespan, suggest that breeding pairs may maintain residence on a territory even if habitat quality is declining, as long as they can forage successfully and attempt to breed there. Once breeding adults are gone from a territory, though, they might not be replaced if the altered landscape is no longer attractive to new potential breeders. In this case, a long lifespan may pose an additional conservation challenge for this species in that a decline in population size may not be noticed until it becomes drastic.

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