

POSSIBLE NEST ATTEMPT BY WOOD STORKS IN MISSISSIPPI

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Prior to the 1970s, Wood Stork (*Mycteria americana*) nesting in the United States was concentrated in Florida. With declining habitat quality in south Florida, Wood Stork nesting expanded to Georgia (1976) and South Carolina (1981) (Ogden 1996). Bent (1926) presents the only record of Wood Storks nesting in Mississippi. He lists them as nesting at Rodney (Claiborne County) with no details.

On 2 June 1997 we observed six Wood Storks sitting on nests in a baldcypress tree at Jones Lake, Warren County, Mississippi. The nests were approximately 40 feet high in a 65 foot tall cypress tree on two adjacent horizontal branches. Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*) were nesting in the same tree.

When we passed beneath the tree in our boat, the storks left the nests but did not leave the tree. Within five minutes after we moved away from the tree, the storks had settled back on the nests as if incubating eggs. We were not able to see any eggs from the boat and did not climb the tree. From our vantage point the nests looked the same as the Great Blue Heron nests, about three feet across and made of sticks. On 12 June we did not see any Wood Storks in the nest tree or in the colony area. On 20 June five of the nests were gone and no storks were observed in the area.

Jones Lake is adjacent to and on the land side of the Mississippi River mainline levee. It is a permanent lake with several large bald cypress and many buttonbushes providing nesting sites for colonial waterbirds. From 1994 to 1997 the Jones Lake colony had an average of 3,032 nesting pairs of nine wading bird species. The nearby borrow pits along the levee provide suitable Wood Stork feeding habitat.

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Wood Storks regularly occur in western Mississippi as postbreeding birds dispersing from colonies in Mexico or Georgia, South Carolina, or Florida. Annual first arrival dates range from 5 June to 11 August. In addition there is a 1956 record of one Wood Stork in a heron colony from 12 April to 8 July (pers. comm. T. Schiefer). Our 2 June record is early, but not out of the historic range for the occurrence of post-breeding birds.

The site of our observations, in a large waterbird colony; nest location, over standing water in a large cypress near other nesting waterbirds; and nest size and composition are all consistent with Wood Stork behavior elsewhere, however, 2 June would be a late egg date. Wood Storks are very responsive to local conditions in the timing of their nesting. In south Florida Wood Storks previously began forming colonies in November to January. With the degradation of habitat, they now begin nesting activities in February or March. In Georgia and South Carolina Wood Storks lay eggs from March to May with fledging occurring in July and August (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1996). If early nests fail, second nests are attempted (Ogden 1996, Rodgers *et al.* 1987).

Wood Storks are federally listed as endangered in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and Alabama. They regularly occur in Mississippi from June to September. Although there are observations of tagged birds from the U.S. breeding population in Mississippi (Ogden 1990), the birds we observed could be from either or both the U.S. and Mexican breeding populations (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1996). Inadequate food and nesting sites may be causing Wood Storks to expand their nesting range. We will continue to monitor the Jones Lake colony to document any nesting attempts, however, Wood Storks commonly shift nest sites especially in response to changes in feeding conditions (Ogden and Patty 1981, Kushlan and Frohring 1986).

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