

## Wood Stork *Mycteria americana*



**Folk Name:** Flint Head, Gourd Head, Wood Ibis

**Status:** Migrant

**Abundance:** Rare

**Habitat:** Shallow edges of lakes, ponds, wide streams, pools

The Wood Stork is a distinctive, large white wading bird with black wing tips and an odd, slate-gray “unfeathered” head. It is a true stork, and is closely related to the well-known European White Stork. It is the only stork that breeds in the United States. Like many of our wading birds, the Wood Stork has faced serious challenges to its survival.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, huge breeding flocks of Wood Storks, one with an estimated 100,000 birds, were present in central Florida. Smaller nesting populations were believed to have extended as far north as South Carolina, where they were said to have bred “in some numbers” until the early 1900s. During this early era, Wood Storks were occasionally found wandering into North Carolina after breeding season. By the mid-to-late 1900s, widespread draining and destruction of wetlands had resulted in serious habitat degradation and loss of Wood Stork breeding sites; consequently, the nation’s Wood Stork population plummeted. By the end of the 1970s, only 5,000 pairs were estimated alive in the United States, and on February 28, 1984, the Wood Stork was listed as an Endangered Species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Conservation measures implemented by federal and state agencies slowly began to help reverse this dramatic decline, and the Wood Stork population gradually began to increase. By 1981, Wood Storks were documented nesting in Colleton County, South Carolina, and in 2005, nesting was first discovered in southeastern Columbus County, North Carolina. By 2014, there were over 2,500 Wood Stork nests in South Carolina, and in 2016, close to 600 nests were counted in North Carolina. On June 26, 2014, after more than 30 years of effort, the Wood Stork population in the United States recovered to the extent that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was able to down-list it from Endangered to Threatened.

There are only four accounts of Wood Stork found within or on the periphery of the region during the twentieth century. The first is a mounted specimen Arthur T. Wayne reported examining while visiting Morganton in 1905. The bird had been collected along the Catawba River in Burke County, just west of the Catawba County line. The stork was on display in a local drug store, and the store owner reported more storks had been seen, but were not shot. The second account is of a Wood Stork



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that showed up in Lancaster County, SC. The record was published in *South Carolina Bird Life* in 1949, but no details were provided. The third account is from 1955 when a “remarkable” flight of Wood Storks was seen—only about 15 miles north of the Iredell County line. Linville Hendren shared his account of this very unusual occurrence: “On Thursday June 23, 1955, a large flock of Wood Ibises settled near Elkin, NC. I did not see the flock, but I did see one bird that was killed and one that was crippled in the wing. According to reports, they came in small flocks. The total was estimated at 150 to 200. The local men and boys attempted to kill as many as possible.”

To formally document this rare sighting, the remains of three immature birds were collected and then “sun cured,” and colored slides were taken of one injured bird. This unexpected post-breeding dispersal event was attributed to unique wind and temperature conditions



*Immature Wood Stork at Charlotte County Club.  
(Taylor Piephoff)*

in the Southeast. The fourth twentieth century account was of a bird seen in Caldwell County on July 16, 1989, just outside of Lenoir. Allen Boynton, a biologist with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, found an injured immature Wood Stork which he was able to capture. Unfortunately, the bird did not survive.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the status of Wood Stork in the region has dramatically changed. This is presumably due to continued nesting success in the Carolinas. John Townsend spotted a Wood Stork flying over the Broad River in Chester County on Independence Day 2000. On July 11, 2008, Gene Schepker found two Wood Storks at the York Hill Yadkin River Access on the Davidson–Rowan county line. On May 30, 2009, two volunteers with the MCPRD were thrilled to discover the first Wood Stork ever sighted in Mecklenburg County. Tyler Mahon and John Bonestell were checking nest boxes at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge, when they spotted a “large heron-type” bird on a muddy spot near the refuge’s observation ponds. The bird quickly flushed, and they immediately recognized it as an immature Wood Stork. About 30 minutes later, the bird came soaring directly overhead, and the pair were able to get several photographs of the stork in flight.

Two weeks later, Rob Bierregaard reported that an immature Wood Stork had shown up beside the 13th hole of the Charlotte Country Club golf course. The stork appeared to be emaciated, ill, or injured. Many birders were able to see and photograph this bird, and a review of photographs led several birders to speculate it was the same stork that had been seen at the wildlife refuge. A local bird rescue group was contacted; unfortunately, the stork disappeared before they had a chance to rescue it.

That fall (2009), a group of Wood Storks showed up at Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge in Anson County. Refuge staff were excited as this was the first record of Wood Stork there. Will Stuart photographed two of the juveniles while visiting the refuge on September 11, 2009, and he found another Wood Stork present on a return visit on September 4, 2010. Refuge staff later reported storks returned there each fall through at least 2014. On July 22, 2015, Tom Ledford watched a Wood Stork in flight while he was driving down Old Charlotte Highway in Indian Trail in Union County. The region’s most recent stork was reported on June 11, 2017. Isaac Kerns photographed a Wood Stork in flight over Rowan County (intersection of Castor Road and Highway 152). If this trend continues, Wood Stork may soon be an expected visitor each year during post-breeding migration in the Central Carolinas.