

Wood Storks - An Indicator for Everglades Health:

Decline of wetlands puts storks' long-term sustainability into question



Introduction

Wood Storks have evolved over millennia in Florida's Greater Everglades, including what is now Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, to take advantage of the ebb and flow of water levels in our wet and dry seasons. Wood Storks have foraged in the drying pools of fish and other prey with such proficiency as to become an icon and indicator of the health of those vast wetland landscapes.

Continued destruction of wetlands has imperiled the Wood Stork in the Everglades, the bird's traditional homeland.

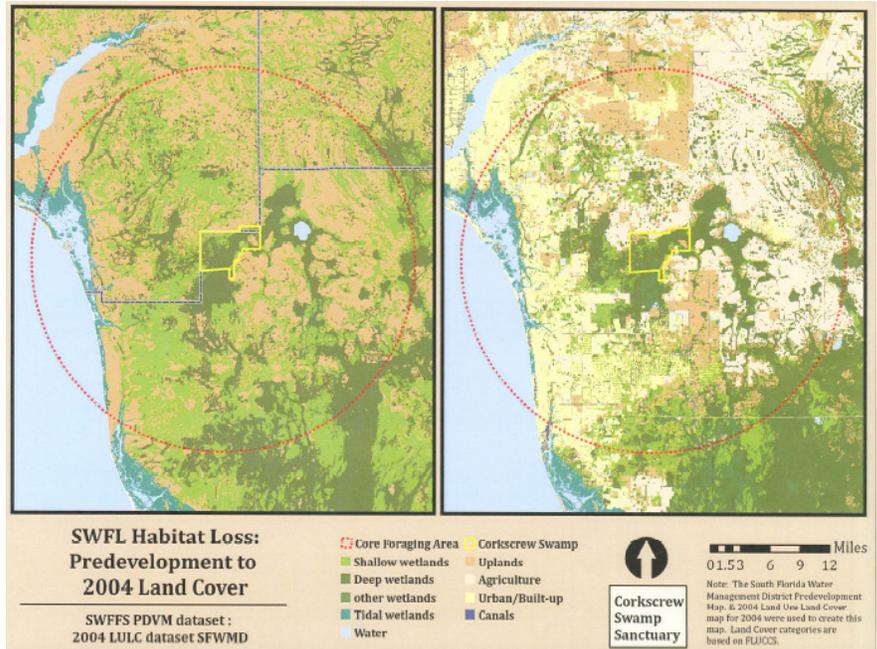


Figure 1. Habitat loss in southwest Florida. Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary outlined in yellow. For a larger image, please visit: <http://bit.ly/1mHpLRC>

The Everglades has seen half its wetlands destroyed by human drainage, including more than seventy per cent of the shallow, seasonal wetlands. This includes wet prairies, which are vital to successful Wood Stork and other wading bird survival. Such losses have imperiled storks, unable to successfully nest in their historic Everglades base except in abnormally wet years. There has not been nesting at the Corkscrew rookery, at one time the largest in the nation, in six of the last eight years – an unprecedented decline.

The Wood Stork's message to us is: wetland protection and restoration are not yet working enough to increase the sustainability of south and southwest Florida.

The Documented Decline of Wetlands in South Florida

Audubon staff have documented continued unsustainable destruction of shallow wetlands through faulty permitting practices and rules throughout the Everglades. This contrasts with public investment of billions of dollars for Everglades Restoration. Bad permits publicly subsidize development at the expense of ecosystems and a sustainable South and Southwest Florida.

The adaptive storks have responded to dire circumstances in the Everglades in the short term by successfully shifting their population to many small coastal colonies near tidal marshes

“Without a recovery of Wood Storks in the Greater Everglades, in general, and at Corkscrew, in particular, no declaration of victory should be made. Audubon objects to weakening protection of Wood Storks under the Endangered Species Act. ”

**- Eric Draper,
Audubon Florida Executive Director**

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farther north in South Carolina and Georgia. Their current northern success has resulted in U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service recently downlisting them from “endangered” to “threatened”.

Audubon views this decision as premature. There are major unanswered questions about the sustainability of the bird’s northern shift. Questions include concerns over long term sea level rise, continuing wetland permitting losses, and lack of survivorship of chicks.

Bring the Wood Stork Home by Bringing Back the Wetlands

To bring Wood Storks back to the Everglades,

including the largest rookery at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, shallow wetland losses must be stemmed. State and federal partners must fix the rules and then enforce them.

In addition, it is essential to restore a significant proportion of wet prairies and other shallow wetlands to the Greater Everglades. Finally, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service must ascertain how sustainable the current stork population increases are in new northern coastal colonies in South Carolina and Georgia, as well as work to assure recovery of the Wood Stork and other wading birds throughout their historic base of the Greater Everglades.

Audubon’s Recommendations to Bring Back the Wood Stork to a Restored Everglades:

- **Fix the faulty way Florida and the nation permit wetland destruction** – Audubon has developed an effective wetland function tracking tool we believe will go a long way toward stopping net wetland losses. The public must demand agencies adhere to the “No Net Wetland Loss” policy President George H.W. Bush announced in 1989.
- **Support and fund effective restoration of wetlands**, especially shallow, seasonal ones like wet prairies. One important way is through Everglades Restoration. South and Southwest Florida depend on its success, as of course does the Wood Stork. Land acquisition with restoration is another important strategy.
- **Do the science** – everything we do in the greater Everglades from ecosystem restoration, to water supply to flood protection, depends on good science, including investing in monitoring and modeling. We can’t succeed if we don’t know what’s going on.
- **U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service must recognize the greater Everglades as essential to recovery of the Wood Stork and many other wading birds.** In addition, the Service must investigate and answer the fundamental science questions Audubon has raised over the sustainability of stork range expansion to the north.



Figure 2. Short-hydroperiod wetlands at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.