

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao



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WOOD STORK

One of Florida's most unmistakeable birds was spotted by my wife, Felicia, at the end of January at a pond in Victoria Gardens. Although the Wood Stork can be seen with fair regularity at some of the federal wildlife refuges and large swamps of the southeast, it is a rare occurrence in Victoria Park.

The Wood Stork is our country's only stork. About 3 1/2 feet long with a wingspread up to 5 1/2 feet, its most distinguishing, unique feature is its big, black, scaly, featherless, rough head, neck, and bill. The body appears mostly immaculate white, but in flight the black tail and

primary wing feathers give it a decidedly 2-toned appearance, especially when it soars overhead like a hawk or eagle. Its feet are pink.

Standing in shallow water, a Wood Stork has a specialized method of catching fish, frogs, crayfish, and snakes: it keeps its huge bill partially opened underwater, ready to snap shut on any prey that it feels with its extremely sensitive touch. The ideal foraging depth of the water is 10 to 12 inches, and this is one of the reasons (besides loss of wetland habitat) why the Wood Stork has declined in numbers and is now classified as “threatened” at both the federal and state levels. Altering the natural water cycles that once characterized Florida by draining, dredging, channeling, or flooding has resulted in depths that are either too shallow or too deep for Wood Storks to successfully forage.

Wood Storks also occur in Georgia, the Carolinas, and tropical America. They breed in

colonies, with hundreds sometimes nesting together (at least historically) in our swamps and mangroves in Feb. and March.