

The Legendary Stork

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Since the Middle Ages, storks have been associated with delivering babies. The “stork” legend began in northern Germany many centuries ago. According to one popular folk story, it was said that the souls of unborn children lived in watery areas such as marshes, wells, springs and ponds. Since storks frequent these areas, it was believed that they fetched the babies’ souls to deliver them to their parents. Another popular tale states that since storks nest on roofs and chimneys in Holland and Germany, the creatures were almost always present on rooftops; thus, when parents needed an explanation for their children as to where they came from, they would just reply, “the stork brought you.” As with many legends, this one has been passed down through the centuries and today the stork is still the symbol associated with newborn babies.

While the legend got its start in the European countries, the good old United States has their own species of stork. The Wood Stork (*Mycteria Americana*) is the only stork species found in North America. Wood storks are large wading birds that stand from two to four feet tall and weigh about ten pounds. Their wingspans can be as wide as five and a half feet. Their bodies are white and they have a black tail and black feathers under their wings. They have no feathers on their heads, which give it a black appearance. They are easily identified because they are the only tall wading birds with black, bald heads.

The wood stork is on the endangered species list. Pollution and destruction of habitat has contributed to their fragile status. In the 1930’s, it was estimated that about 20,000 pairs of the creature existed. By 1960, only 10,000 pairs remained. Since the 70’s it is estimated that approximately only 5,000 pairs remain. One of the reasons that their populations have declined is because of their voracious appetite. Although, the wood storks eat small fish, they eat a lot of them. A nesting pair of storks, with two fledglings, can eat over 400 pounds of fish during a single breeding season. Since they find their food in wetlands, when these ecosystems are polluted or destroyed for development, their vital food source is no longer available.

These beautiful wading birds feed on minnows and other small fish in shallow water. They use their long bills to fish. The stork opens its bill and sticks it into the water. Once a fish touches the bill or swims closely by, the bird snaps its bill shut in about 25 milliseconds and wallah! Dinner is served!

These birds are very social and are generally found in flocks. As many as 25 pairs of storks may use a single tree to nest; this is called a colony. A colony of wood storks is called a rookery. Both the male and female build their nest from sticks and nearby vegetation. The female birds lay from two to five eggs and the father helps incubate the eggs. The hatchlings will emerge in about 28 – 30 days. Both parents raise the chicks by feeding and caring for them. The young eat about 15 times a day for the first eight weeks. Parent storks will also collect water in their bills and bring it to the nest to drool on the babies to cool them off. Once the chicks are nine weeks old, they can live on their own. Wood stork pairs often mate for life. Pairs will often return to the same nesting colony site year after year. However, if frightened, these shy creatures have been known to flee from the area and not return. It is very important that they are not disturbed when nesting.

Wood storks always plan the breeding season around availability of food. Since they need so much nutrition for themselves and their babies, this is a vital issue for them. Dry seasons actually help the wood storks because when lakes and ponds shrink, the fish have to move in smaller ponds where they are easier to catch. These birds depend on periods of flooding with alternating dryer periods.

Wood storks are excellent fliers. They soar thousands of feet in the air with their legs and necks outstretched and ride on the air currents. Sometimes they roll and dive while in flight. They can soar down from high in the sky. They may also be seen flying in flocks with egrets and ibises. On land, they can be found anywhere near water such as swamps, marshes and ponds. They are quiet birds since they have no muscles attached to their voice box. They may croak or hiss occasionally, but unlike other feathered creatures, this one doesn't make much noise at all. It is said that if a healthy wood stork is found in a wetland; that is an indication that the wetland is healthy.

Storks are commonly believed to bring good fortune and have been associated with fertility for centuries. In Roman mythology, storks were sacred to Venus. Aristotle made killing a stork a crime and Romans passed a stork law that stated children must care for their elderly parents. Throughout history, storks have been revered and legend upon legend has been told about them.

The reality is that storks, when healthy, help keep our wetlands healthy. They keep the food chain balanced and add diversity and beauty to our environment. This endangered bird needs our help. Wetland habitats must be protected and kept clean. Trees that they nest in must not be removed and these shy creatures should not be disturbed, but viewed and appreciated from a distance. We can all do our part to protect these amazing animals.

STORK TRIVIA

- A colony of storks is considered successful if its parents average at least 1.5 fledged young per nest.
- Male and female wood storks look alike.
- Wood storks cool off by urinating on their legs. When the sun evaporates the urine, it cools them off, like sweat.
- A group of storks has many collective nouns, including "a clatter of storks," "a filth of storks," "a muster of storks," "a phalanx of storks," and a "swoop of storks."
- In Florida, the wood stork breeds during the late winter dry season when its fish prey are concentrated in shrinking ponds.
- They nest above water to prevent predators such as raccoons from feeding on their eggs and young.
- Wood storks have been known to fly as high as 6,000 feet. They will fly as much as 50 miles in search of food.