

A rare sight: Wood storks, other wading birds enjoy feeding frenzy at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary

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COLLIER COUNTY — Mother Nature is putting on her greatest show in years at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary as endangered wood storks and a host of wading birds stage a feeding frenzy.

Corkscrew's lettuce lakes, right off the sanctuary's popular boardwalk, are boiling with millions of tiny fish, and water levels have dropped into the optimal range for wood storks and other wading birds like roseate spoonbills, egrets, night herons, ibis - and alligators too. Depending on rainfall, scientists expect the spectacle to continue for six weeks or so.

"I'm thrilled," Corkscrew manager Ed Carlson said this week. Carlson, who's worked at the Audubon sanctuary for 40 years, said the sight has left him awestruck. "It's just spectacular."

Hundreds of fuzzy-headed, somewhat clumsy, adolescent wood storks are fledging after two consecutive unsuccessful nesting seasons at Corkscrew, the bird's largest U.S. breeding site. Wood storks have been listed as endangered since 1984.

The stage was set when Tropical Storm Fay dumped 11 inches of rain on Corkscrew in five days last summer. On Aug. 25, Corkscrew registered the fourth highest water levels since 1958.

Since August, water levels have dropped by almost 4 feet. This concentrated the fish in places like the lettuce lakes, which attract storks and other wading birds.

The ideal environmental conditions made it possible for wood storks to begin nesting, laying their first eggs Dec. 12. Between mid-December and mid-February, 1,100 stork nests were started.

Historically, nesting starts in November or December. This year marks the fifth time since 1984 that wood storks have nested before Jan. 1, greatly increasing their chances for a successful nesting season before summer rains disperse their food source.

In the late 1970s, storks began nesting later, typically in January and February due to lost foraging habitat in November and December. Last year and 2007 marked the first time in recorded history there was no nesting at Corkscrew.

Two years of pronounced drought has also changed the dynamics of the fish population. Few large fish-eating fish made it through the drought years, leaving fewer predators to reduce the numbers of small fish and crayfish that make up the bulk of the stork diet.

Recent sampling efforts suggest that there are up to 1,000 fish per meter in those shrinking pools in the cypress forest, most less than 4 inches long.

Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, located at 375 Sanctuary Road West, north of Immokalee Road, is open for visitors from 7 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. everyday between April 11 and Sept. 30. Between Oct. 1 and April 10, Corkscrew is open to the public from 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Admission to the boardwalk within one hour of closing is not allowed. The Sanctuary may close when severe weather threatens. For more information on admission fees, call (239) 348-9151.

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