

The Status and Occurrence of Wood Stork (*Mycteria americana*) in British Columbia.

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Introduction and Distribution

The Wood Stork (*Mycteria americana*) is widespread and often common throughout much of South America, Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean (Coulter *et al.* 1999). It also occurs year-round in Florida and the surrounding areas of the southeastern U.S. (north to South Carolina, east to the Florida Panhandle) and is a regular migrant elsewhere along the U.S. Gulf coast (Coulter *et al.* 1999). It is an uncommon post-breeding visitor to southernmost California as well as north in the eastern United States, and rarely reaching eastern Canada (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Populations in the southeastern United States have declined slightly from the early 1900s, although the magnitude of the decline has been debated (Coulter *et al.* 1999). The post-breeding population that visits southern California, however, has declined precipitously since the 1970s, when the species was considered common at the Salton Sea (Shuford and Gardali 2008). Similarly, although the species formerly occurred along the south coast of California throughout the Imperial Valley (including the Salton Sea), and along the Colorado River, virtually the entire post-breeding population now occurs only along the southern shores of the Salton Sea near the Mexican border (Shuford and Gardali 2008). As this western population is possibly the source of potential vagrants to the Pacific Northwest, these declines may influence the likelihood of future vagrants to British Columbia. The only other record in northwestern North America is of an immature bird that was collected in Boise County, Idaho in June 1910 (IBRC 2011). There are no records for Oregon, Washington State or Alaska (OFO 2012, Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012, West 2008). The Wood Stork is an accidental vagrant to British Columbia with only one historical record (Campbell *et al.* 1990).

Identification and Similar Species

The Wood Stork is a species that is shown and discussed in all standard North American field guides. The following is taken from Coulter *et al.* (1999) and gives useful information on the identification of the Wood Stork.

The Wood Stork is a very large wading bird measuring between 85–115 cm tall with a wingspan measuring between 150–165 cm. Adult birds are entirely white, but have black primary feathers, black secondary feathers, and a short, blackish-coloured tail that has a greenish and purplish sheen in perfect light. The head and neck are un-feathered, scaly, and dark gray. The bill is black, long and very thick at the base, tapering evenly and decurved on the distal half. The males and females are similar in appearance, and plumages are similar throughout the year, except during breeding season when the undertail-coverts are longer and more plume-like with a buff or pinkish wash on wing-lining and sometimes appear on other parts of the

bird's plumage. The legs and feet are dark, and the toes are pink during the breeding season. The pink may extend up the leg and almost to the tarsal joint, fading to a flesh colour during the remainder of the year. Sub-adult Wood Storks are similar to the adults, but the head and neck are covered with grayish-feathers which are gradually lost as the bird matures. Sub-adult birds also have a pale yellow or straw-coloured bill that gradually darkens with age. Wood Storks often feed in groups in open wetlands. Birds move continuously when feeding and like to probe the mud by moving their open bill from side to side in combination with Foot-Stirring and Wing-Flicking behaviours. The Wood Stork often feeds in lines, moving through the water as a group.

The Wood Stork is unique in appearance and unlikely to be confused with any other species in British Columbia, except during flight, when it may resemble an American White Pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*). The Wood Stork can be distinguished from the American White Pelican (which frequently soars like Wood Stork) by long, projecting legs and a black (not white) tail (Howell and Webb 2010). Another similar looking species to the Wood Stork is the White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*) that has not yet occurred in British Columbia but has been seen once in Washington State (Wahl *et al.* 2005, Howell and Webb 2010). The Wood Stork flies with its neck extended as ibises do, but in flight it is distinguished from the White Ibis by the birds larger size, and by the black on both primaries and secondaries (not just primaries)(Howell and Webb 2010).

Occurrence and Documentation

Surely one of the most unexpected and remarkable rarities to occur in British Columbia, the Wood Stork is known in the province only from a single observation that was present at Telegraph Creek, in the northwestern corner of the province, on September 15, 1970 (Campbell *et al.* 1990). The bird died shortly after its discovery, and the specimen was sent to the collections at the Royal British Columbia Museum (Campbell *et al.* 1990). Few additional details surrounding this record have been published, although Campbell *et al.* (1990) indicated that the local newspaper in Victoria covered the occurrence at the time, even publishing a photograph of the live bird.

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