

NOTES

Fla. Field Nat. 25(2):51-53, 1997.

FIRST RECORD OF CRESTED CARACARAS NESTING IN A CYPRESS

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The Crested Caracara (*Caracara plancus*) is a member of the family Falconidae and is a common resident throughout parts of Mexico and Central and South America. The subspecies *C. p. audubonii*, or Audubon's Crested Caracara, reaches the northern limits of its distribution in Florida, Texas, and Arizona (Palmer 1988). This species inhabits open grasslands, prairies, deserts, and brushlands and nests typically in the tallest available vegetation (Levy 1961, Oberholser 1974, Short 1974, Rivera-Rodríguez and Rodríguez Estrella 1992, Dickinson and Arnold 1996, Layne 1996). Records from Florida have documented the Crested Caracara's predominant use of cabbage palms (*Sabal palmetto*) as nest trees, although records exist of their nesting in live oak (*Quercus virginiana*), pine (*Pinus* spp.), Australian pine (*Casuarina* spp.), saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*), black gum (*Nyssa sylvatica*), and mangrove (species not listed) (Scott 1892, Nicholson 1929, Sprunt 1954, Quincy 1976, Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

On 11 February 1996, while surveying for Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) nests around the margin of Lake Istokpoga in Highlands County, we found a Crested Caracara nest in a cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) (Fig. 1). We believe this is the first published record of Crested Caracaras nesting in a cypress. Bent (1938) stated that caracaras are "seldom seen in pines and still more rarely in the cypress country."

In the region north and west of Lake Okeechobee, cypress are associated frequently with sloughs and are common along the edges of lakes. At the site near Lake Istokpoga, the Crested Caracara nest tree is in a cattle pasture containing scattered live oaks and cypress and is 139 m from the lake margin. Ground vegetation consists of pasture grasses such as bahia (*Paspalum* spp.) and pangola (*Digitaria decumbens*), and scattered clumps of rushes (*Juncus effusus*), all averaging less than 1.0 m in height. A few cabbage palms are present, and all are within the range of tree heights used by Crested Caracaras as nest trees (Morrison 1996). The nest tree is 8.5 m high and located within a group of 5 cypress. The nest was situated at the very top of the tree and was completely exposed.

When discovered, the nest contained two nestlings approximately 4 weeks old. We followed progress of the nest through February and March 1996. Because the nest tree is located in a pasture along a major road and close to a residential area, it was relatively easy to observe the adults visiting the nest and to monitor chick development. On 12 March 1996, we banded the nestlings and fitted one with a radiotransmitter as part of a study we are conducting of the reproductive ecology and habitat associations of Florida's Crested Caracaras. The chicks fledged successfully on 14 March 1996.

Within 2 weeks after the chicks fledged, the nest blew down. It was similar in size, form, and appearance to other Crested Caracara nests (Morrison 1996). Another structure consisting of larger sticks remained in the tree, this apparently had provided sup-



Figure 1. Crested Caracara nest containing two nestlings in a cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) along the shore of Lake Istokpoga, Highlands County. Photo by L. Danielle Todd.

port for the caracaras' nest. Crested Caracaras are known to reuse nests and to appropriate old nests of other species (Schutze 1904, Dickinson 1996, Morrison 1996). We estimate that this pair could have begun nest building as early as November. Cypress are devoid of leaves at this time, so this tree was selected by the adults despite complete absence of leaf cover. Crested Caracaras build loose, rather unkempt nests, so nest site selection may necessitate choosing a tree with adequate structural support. We believe the caracaras may have selected the cypress because the other structure was already there. Ospreys, Red-shouldered Hawks (*Buteo lineatus*), American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) and Fish Crows (*C. ossifragus*) also nest in this area and could have built this structure. We do not know whether this structure had been there for some time or whether the caracaras displaced the other residents.

This is MacArthur Agro-Ecology Research Center contribution No. 28 and Florida Agricultural Experiment Station journal series # R-05253. The photograph was taken by L. Danielle Todd.

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