

**There are many things about Corkscrew Swamp that make it one of the crown jewels of National Audubon's sanctuary system. But the bird that put Corkscrew on the map, the bird that everyone came, and still comes, to see is the Wood Stork.**

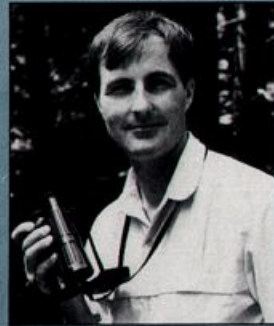
**"I** HOPE YOU FOLKS know the sanctuary doesn't open until 9:00," the fellow said, although it was pretty clear that we did not, or at least had not known until our arrival. It had never occurred to us to call ahead.

Sanctuaries, like organisms, adjust to accommodate environmental stress which comes in many forms. Drought, like the one gripping Florida at the time of our visit is a stress. Popularity is a stress, too, impacting all living things within an environment—including those whose job it is to maintain it. Restricted visiting hours offer denizens and dedicated employees alike some respite from the flood of vacationers and tour groups that descend on Florida every winter.

The sanctuary, National Audubon's 11,000-acre Corkscrew Swamp is the geographical base of this story and it's under stress. For years, from the elevated boardwalk cleverly laid down through a cypress labyrinth, "nature lovers" (followed by bird watchers... followed by birders) have searched for somber-eyed Barred Owls and marveled at the flashing wings of Pileated Woodpeckers. Herons and egrets (maybe the finest assortment in North America) stalk the edges of pools, and in the colder months all manner of tree-top birds bring heads back and binoculars up.

The naturalist stood at the gate. He'd arrived long before actual work hours and his face was set in task-

Pete Dunne  
**AMERICAN BIRDING**



**Visiting Corkscrew; Finding Grace Under Pressure**

*Illustration by Keith Hansen*

mode. Clearly he had things that needed doing—a program to prepare, a report to file,—all the fingernail-chewing tasks that clog a professional naturalist's life. He tried, and almost succeeded in hiding these things behind a wall of professionalism that only another professional might see behind.

He looked harried, which is typical. I guessed him to be in his late twenties which approaches the natural life span for the breed. By the time most naturalists turn 30, the idealism that sustains them has pretty much dried up. Financial insecurity drives most to find jobs in the real world or to move on to administrative posts. Either way, you lose touch with the natural world. Linda and I had both been naturalists in our time. So we know.

The easiest thing for him to do was shrug and walk away. It was in his best interest and probably in the best interest of the sanctuary. After all, the mistake was ours.

Sanctuary Hours: Nine to five. Read 'em and weep.

But being professional he could see that our interest was sincere, that we weren't just killing time after breakfast. We carried binoculars. We were draped in the right kind of gear. We spoke his language.

Being a naturalist his instincts also told him that we were responsible sorts who knew and would adhere to sanctuary etiquette. We wouldn't

wander off trails. We wouldn't throw food to the alligators. We wouldn't trip over a fractionally elevated board on the trail, skin our elbows and sue for damages.

There is the letter of the law, and there is the intent of the law, and he was caught in the middle.

"O.K.," he sighed. "Just give me a minute and I'll write you through." Then he hurried away.

There are many things about Corkscrew Swamp that make it one of the crown jewels of National Audubon's sanctuary system. Many things. But the bird that put Corkscrew on the map, the bird that everyone came, and still comes, to see is the Wood Stork, North America's only stork. The great black-and-white birds stand 3½ feet tall; the wings span 6 feet. Up close, and in person, the bird appears grotesque. Its gray, unfeathered head looks like an animate skull, positively vulturine. But in flight the great winged water birds are poetry in motion, able to mount the columns of super heated air to incredible heights.

But poetry, whether etched on paper or against the bottom of clouds, exists only at the sufferance of harsh realities. Persistent drought and poor water management sent Florida's Wood Stork population plummeting. In 1960, there were 10,000 nesting pairs in the state. Twenty years later fewer than half that number remained, and nesting at Corkscrew has been intermittent. At the time of our visit, nesting was nonexistent.

True to his word, the naturalist returned and opened the gate to the center.

"Are you members?" he wanted to know, writing as he spoke.

"Yes." There is a discount for members.

"Really?" he wondered aloud.

"Really," we affirmed.

While the procedural forms were honored we tested the limits of his patience, asked questions about the sanctuary, the drought and its effect



on wildlife. But these he parried away with polite, pat, professional, public answers. Naturalists the world over are adept at handling people who always want a little more than anyone else is getting—even if it is only your time.

Like I said, Linda and I had both been naturalists in our time. So we know.

The trail cut through pine and palmetto, past screeching grackles,

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## Stress causes hardship, but it also prompts solutions.

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chanting Carolina Wrens and robins enthusiastic about going somewhere else. At the edge of a meadow, the trail became a sturdy, elevated boardwalk. The platform was almost superfluous, almost an embarrassment. During the rainy season, it offers visitors dry footing through a dark, wet wonderland. But now, in winter Florida's dry season, *and* in the middle of a persistent drought, only the stained trunks of trees betrayed how deep the water once lay. The ground

beneath the platform was blackened and dry; the air parched.

The swamp, that wasn't a swamp, was not devoid of life. Here and there we caught glimpses of things, shy creatures who seemed ill at ease in their drought-stricken world. As we walked, a pair of Pileated Woodpeckers fled before us, playing musical trees. Overhead, a foraging flock of titmice and gnatcatchers fussed in the canopy. Within their ranks were Solitary and White-eyed vireos, beady-eyed Black-and-white Warblers, a Yellow-throated Warbler, and several each of Yellow-rumped, Northern Parulas, Pine and Palm warblers—the winter regulars.

Aside from these woodland species, Corkscrew Swamp was disquietingly silent. The chorus of frogs that should have made the air ring was an echo trapped in the memory of trees. The wail of a Limpkin was gone.

A platform overlooking the central marsh marked the end of the trail. On the far side, the great stick nests that the storks once used were plainly visible. But of Wood Storks, the only ones to be seen were the few high, soaring birds whose outlines were fused against the bottoms of clouds. This year again, the storks were not nesting. The drought had put procreation on hold. There is no fortune in

nesting if you cannot feed your young. And Wood Storks cannot feed their young without water.

"What do you want to do now?" Linda asked.

"Stick around for a bit. It's not very likely that we're going to get back here soon. Not until the drought breaks or somebody irrigates this state."

"Stops irrigating it," Linda corrected.

"Stops irrigating it," I agreed.

There have always been cycles in Florida, wet years followed by dry ones, and nature can abide these. But the artificial drought created by Florida's growing population and burgeoning agriculture is not a cycle, it is a drain. Through that drain, much of the magic in Corkscrew Swamp and many other wild and natural places in Florida is being lost. In 1987, the Wood Stork was placed on the Endangered Species List.

"Well, I'm getting thirsty," Linda said. "If you want to stay, I'll meet you back at the van."

"All right," I said, "give me another half-hour or so."

Three pairs of Red-shouldered Hawks were locked in frenzied courtship. As I watched, a male closed on a mewling female and they mated. Nearby a White-eyed Vireo chanted its belligerent challenge.

"*Spit. And-see-if-I-care. Spit... Spit. And-see-if-I-care. Spit...*"

From the distant wall of cypress, a host of Turkey Vultures caught the first good thermal of the morning and spiraled aloft. I counted 600 birds in the dark funnel before the topmost broke ranks and headed off to wherever it is vultures spend their day... which in Florida is pretty nearly everywhere.

But of Wood Storks, except for the spare few passing high overhead, there were none. Even the shadows they cast fell somewhere else.

On my way out, I encountered a tiny, elderly woman with bird-like eyes and a patch on her shoulder that

marked her for a sanctuary volunteer—someone whose job it is to absorb some of the duties and stress associated with the maintenance of a sanctuary. She brought a quieting finger to her lips, and as I drew near pointed to a place not far from the boardwalk.

There, in a drought-shrunken pool, thick with duck weed, were four young otters. They wrestled and reveled in the puddle. Oblivious to drought and voyeurs; oblivious to anything but their play. We stood there, this helpful stranger and I, for a long time, marveling at the magic a little water can bring. Finally, I nodded my thanks and moved away, feeling privileged and a little sad.

The otters were still very much on my mind when the boardwalk ended, when I turned through the exit that channels visitors back through the visitor center gift shop. Inside were patrons buying Wood Stork t-shirts and volunteers standing behind the register making change. In offices beyond were staff people whose eyes were glued to the paper on their desks and whose faces were locked in chore-mode. I searched for the naturalist whose instincts had won us privileged passage but he wasn't to be seen.

I wanted to ask someone about Limpkins, where they were and how I might find one. I wanted to inquire about Wood Storks. How many there were, what their prospects for the future might be. Most of all, I wanted to share with someone the whereabouts of the otters—because set against the backdrop of drought and an uncertain future, the sighting was precious.

But everyone was so busy and their stress was so real. Being another professional, with a task-clogged desk of my own, I did not want to add to their stress. The only gift I could offer, the only thanks worth giving them was avoidance.

So I left. Took my questions and the whereabouts of the otters with


me. Went off to find Linda. Went off to get a drink of water. Went off to contemplate organisms and environments under stress.

And now several years have passed. The rains have come again. The drought is over, for a time, and this year the storks are nesting.

In Florida, land planners are beginning to grapple with the problem of water rights and at Corkscrew Swamp, they are grappling with the future. There are plans for a new facility to better and more easily serve the needs of visitors and to fulfill Audubon's conservation and education mission.

Stress causes hardship, but it also prompts solutions.

I still recall my visit, during the time of stress. And the thing I recall most is not the drought and not the absence of Wood Storks. These are merely part of the backdrop upon which my memory rests.

What I recall most often is a naturalist who broke through his stress to give us entry and the volunteer who reached through a drought and gave me the otters. What I recall is graciousness under pressure. 

—Pete Dunne is the author of *Tales of a Low-Rent Birder*, coauthor of *Hawks in Flight*, and director of natural history information for the New Jersey Audubon Society.

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**COSTA RICA** - 9-12 days, various dates.  
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**VENEZUELA** - 14 days, March  
**ECUADOR** - 15 days, July-Aug.  
**ARGENTINA** - 22 days, Nov.-Dec.  
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**KENYA** - 20 days Mar.; 17 other months.  
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