

THE WOODSTORK COLONIES IN THE  
NORTH EASTERN COROZAL DISTRICT,  
BELIZE. 1991 AND 1992 SEASONS.  
INCLUDING A REPORT ON OTHER  
BIRD COLONIES IN THE  
CHETUMAL BAY AREA

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There are only two species of Storks (Ciconiidae) occurring in Belize. The most famous one is the Jabiru (*Jabiru mycteria*), Belize's largest bird and a well known conservation symbol. The second species is the Woodstork (*Mycteria americana*) and the history of the Woodstork in Belize is one of rapid decline. Until a few decades ago, the numbers of breeding Woodstorks breeding in the Coastal lagoons of Northern Belize apparently reached several thousands. Local and Mexican fishermen collected the young birds to barbecue them.

Thousands of young birds were offered annually at the markets of Corozal (Belize) and Chetumal (Quintana Roo). The adult birds reacted to the destruction of their offspring by moving to other nesting sites. Sometimes a colony would escape the attention of the hunters for a year, but eventually the colony was always located and the slaughter continued. Numbers of Woodstorks dwindled and it is assumed that in 1982 all known colonies were abandoned (Weyer, 1986). In February 1991 during an overflight of the area, two small bird colonies containing nesting Woodstorks were discovered. One colony was located within the

Shipstern Nature Reserve while the other was located in Spanish Point Lagoon, 40 km South of Sarteneja. Although these sightings were the first confirmed breeding records of Woodstorks in Belize for several years it is assumed that both colonies were in existence from at least one year earlier (based on information of local informants). Both colonies contained other nesting species as well. Based on information from local fishermen there is a third Woodstork colony in the Punta Jas area just off the Quintana Roo coast (Fig. 1).

### The 1991 breeding season

The Colony inside the Shipstern Nature Reserve (colony 1) was monitored frequently by reserve personnel, mainly to prevent poaching. In May 1991 the colony housed:

- *Mycteria americana* (Woodstork; Gaytán): nearly 70 nests.
- *Egretta rufescens* (Reddish Egret; Garcita Morena): at least 6 pair.
- *Ajaia ajaja* (Spoonbill; chocolatera): 3 pair.
- *Cochlearius cochlearius* (Boatbilled Heron; Rura): one pair.
- *Casmerodius albus* (Great Egret; Garza blanca): 10 pair.
- *Egretta tricolor* (Tricolored Heron; Garza hoohob): 5 pair.
- *Anhinga anhinga* (Anhinga; Picofino o choral): one pair.
- *Phalacrocorax auritus* (Double Crested Cormorant): more than a dozen pair.

Later in the year the number of Tricolored Herons increased, reaching some 40 nests.

Unfortunately the author was not able to visit the colony at Spanish point (colony 2) later in the breeding season. From the overflight on the 27th of February its assumed that there were at least:

- One or two dozen breeding Woodstorks.
- Several dozen Great Egret.
- A few pair of Roseate Spoonbill.

### The 1992 breeding season

At the Colony inside the Shipstern Nature Reserve (colony 1), the birds returned in the first week of March. At March 11th, some 120 Woodstorks could be counted on the rookery. Not all birds stayed at the island because later in the season the colony estimated not more than some 25 nests. With the reported increase of the Spanish Point Colony,

it is assumed that many of the Shipstern birds moved to Spanish Point to breed there. The reason for this is not clear. Possibly the birds were disturbed early in the season and thereby tempted to move. From April the 21st onwards, Shipstern Nature Reserve personnel maintained 24h presence (in a camp 1 km away) near the colony. No problems were encountered. The young birds started leaving the nest in the second week of June and on June 12th permanent surveillance was lifted.

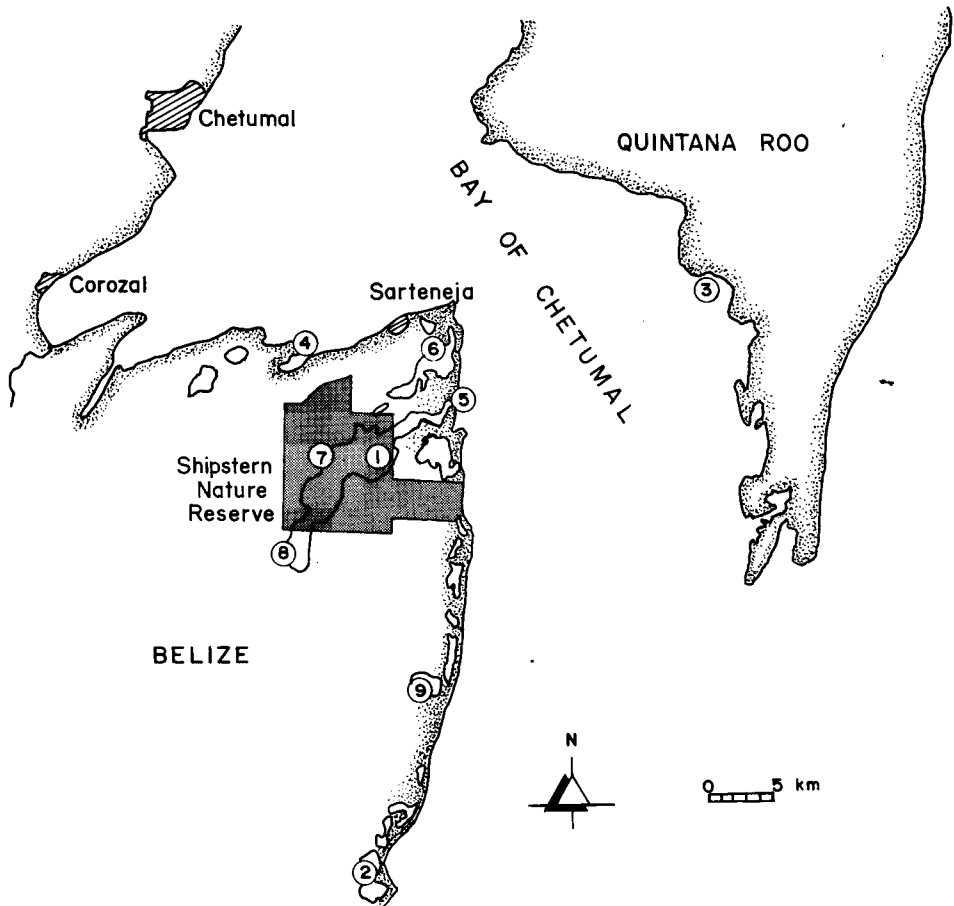
To reduce disturbance to a minimum, no attempts were made to make direct bird counts; approximate 1992 brooding results at the Shipstern Nature Reserve Colony were:

- Woodstork: approximately 50 young birds flew out.
- Reddish Egret: A maximum of 25 birds (adults + fully fledged young) were seen.
- Tricolored Heron: Possibly 10 pair.
- Great Egrets: Something like 10 pair.
- Roseate Spoonbill: A maximum of 9 adults were seen but only 6 young left the Island.
- Boatbilled Heron: 1 pair.
- Anhinga: 1 pair.
- Olivaceous Cormorant; cormorán o camacho (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus olivaceus*): early in the season, number unknown.
- Double Crested Cormorant: possibly one dozen pair, later in the season.

An overflight on February the 24th did not reveal any Woodstorks at Spanish Point Lagoon (colony 2). The breeding season had not yet started. Several Great Egrets and some Roseate Spoonbills were already present.

On April the 14th, we were informed that there were large numbers of nesting Woodstorks in the Spanish point lagoon. Some 70 nests were counted. Also present were "large numbers" of great Egret, Tricolored Heron, some Roseate Spoonbills and possibly other species. Around the 7th of May the colony was raided and several dozen of barbecued Woodstork nestlings were sold locally in Sarteneja.

We visited the Colony on the 12th of June and counted 13 adult Woodstorks plus some 15 fully fledged young (partly flying). Except for 2 pair of Great Egrets there were no other species seen. All birds were extremely shy. Some notes on other bird colonies in the Shipstern lagoon and Chetumal bay area:



**Fig. 1.** Map of Nort Eastern Corozal district, Belize, with bird colonies discussed in text indicated. Dotted area: Shipstern Nature Reserve. 1: Woodstork colony in Spanish Point lagoon. 3: Woodstork colony near Punta Jas, Quintana Roo. 4: Cayo Falso in Chetumal Bay. 5: Shpstern Caye. 6: Colony in north end of Shipstern Lagoon. 7: Colony in middle Shipstern Lagoon. 8: Colony in south Shipstern Lagoon. 9: Colony in High Bluff lagoon.

**Colony 3.** (Small cayes of the coast of Quintana Roo): Both during the 1991 and 1992 breeding seasons "large" numbers of breeding Woodstorks and Egrets were reported from 2 small cayes. Unfortunately the author never had the opportunity to visit this colony.

**Colony 4.** (Cayo Falso in Chetumal Bay): in the 1991/1992 seasons housed Brown Pelicans; pontó (*Pelecanus occidentalis*), Great Egrets, Boatbilled Herons, Olivaceous and Double Crested Cormorants and a few Magnificent Fregatebirds; chemay o rabihorcado (*Fregata magnificens*).

**Colony 5.** (Cayo Conejos or Shipstern Caye on the east coast) Used to house Reddish Egrets, Roseate Spoonbills and White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*). Disturbance caused the birds to desert the Island. In 1992 only some Olivaceous Cormorants, some Tricolored Herons and 3 pair of Reddish Egrets bred here.

**Colony 6.** (Northern Shipstern Lagoon) Newly formed colony with refugees from Shipstern Caye, approximately 50 nests of White Ibis in 1992, 10 pair of Tricolored Heron and two pair of Reddish Egret.

**Colony 7.** (Middle Shipstern Lagoon) in 1992 Several Cormorants and some Great Egrets breeding.

**Colony 8.** (South Shipstern Lagoon) in 1992 Several Cormorants and some Great egrets breeding.

**Colony 9.** (High Bluff lagoon) Never visited but aerial overlights in February 1991 and February 1992 showed substantial numbers of Egrets.

## Discussion

The Shipstern/Sarteneja area along the Bay of Chetumal, with its extended coastline and maze of coastal lagoons has a lot of potential for big waders like Herons, Spoonbills, Storks and Ibis. But although there are at present nine breeding colonies known to the author, the total number of breeding birds is low and possibly even dropping.

All species involved are protected by Belizean law but they are also traditionally eaten in the local communities and adult Egrets. Herons, Ibis, Storks and Cormorants are still being netted and shot for food. Most lethal factor, however, is the constant pressure on the breeding

colonies. Eggs and nestlings of all species involved are frequently "harvested". Fishermen with access to boats, an extensive knowledge of the coastline and an excess of time during the closed lobster season which coincides with the bird breeding season, are prepared to raid even such distant colonies as the one in Spanish Point Lagoon.

The Shipstern Nature Reserve has taken up the active protection of the Woodstork colony within the Reserve, this colony is not only important because of the Woodstorks but also because of other locally threatened species that breed there like the Reddish Egret and Roseate Spoonbill. Protection of the Shipstern colony in 1992 involved 24 h presence of at least one guard near the colony during the time that the young birds were in danger of being harvested. Possibly this period was too short as there is reason to believe that the colony was disturbed during the egg laying period. How important this active protection is for the survival of species like the Woodstork in Belize is demonstrated by the fate of the Spanish Point colony.

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### **Abstract**

The status of 8 bird colonies in the North Eastern Corozal district is reviewed. Special emphasis is being put on the Woodstork (*Mycteria americana*), a species that is believed to have returned to breed in the area after an absence of more than a decade. All colonies are being threatened as a result of excessive hunting.

### **Resumen**

Se revisa el status de ocho colonias de aves en el Distrito Nororiental de Corozal. Se hace un especial énfasis en la especie *Mycteria americana*; se presume que esta especie ha regresado a reproducirse en la zona después de una ausencia mayor a una década. Todas las colonias están siendo amenazadas como resultado de la cacería excesiva.