

## Audubon's Crested Caracara

*(Polyborus plancus audubonii)*

Audubon's crested caracara is listed as a **Threatened** species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FFWCC). The caracara was listed due to population declines, primarily because of loss of its dry prairie habitat. **It is illegal to harass, harm, capture, or kill this bird.**

Photo courtesy James N. Layne



### Description

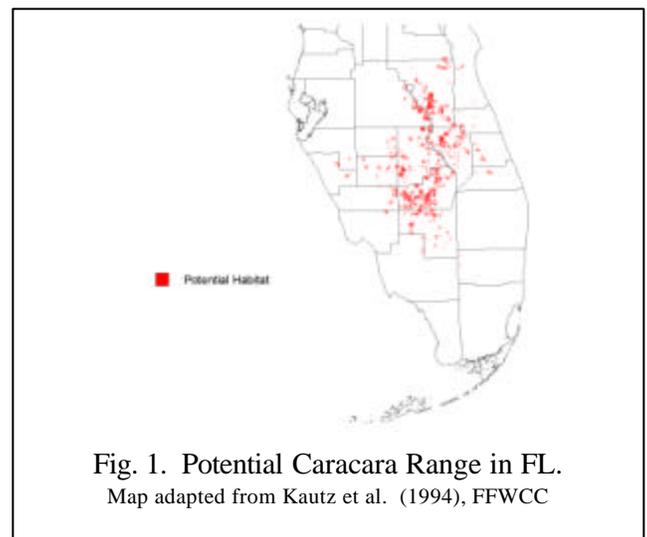
- The caracara is about the size of an osprey (21 to 23 inches in length), with long, yellow legs. There is a crest on the head and a heavy, bluish bill.
- It is brownish black on the crown, wings and lower belly. The lower part of the head, throat, and upper abdomen are white. The breast and upper back are

whitish, heavily barred with black. The tail is white with narrow crossbars and broad dark terminal band.

- Large white patches near the tips of the wings and the white tail broadly tipped in black are very conspicuous in flight and can be recognized at a distance.

### Range

Historically, this subspecies was found as far north as Nassau County, and as far south as Collier County and the lower Florida Keys of Monroe County. It is presently found in south central Florida in Charlotte, Collier, Glades, Hardee, Hendry, Highlands, Martin, Monroe, Okeechobee, Osceola, Palm Beach, Polk, and St. Lucy Counties (Fig 1). **The region of greatest abundance for this bird is the five-county area north and west of Lake Okeechobee.**



### Habitat

The crested caracara is a bird of open country and in Florida, it is primarily found in large dry or wet prairie areas with scattered cabbage palm. It also utilizes some improved pasture lands and lightly wooded areas. Caracaras prefer to nest in cabbage palm trees surrounded by open habitat with low groundcover and low density of tall or shrubby vegetation.

The caracara in Florida is resident and nonmigratory, with adults staying in their home range year round. Home ranges of individual birds vary from about 1.5 square miles up to about 9.5 square miles in area. Juvenile birds are nomadic until they pair off and establish their own home range.

Caracaras nest primarily during the winter dry season, with the peak period in January and February. New nests are constructed each year, but often in the same tree. The nest is a bulky structure of vines and sticks, usually well concealed in a cabbage palm tree, but can be seen by looking up directly into the palms from alongside the trunk. Palms over 15 feet in height, with large, full, closed crowns are most likely to be selected. Two to three young are produced and the family group usually remains together for 2 to 3 months after the young fledge.

The caracara is a highly opportunistic feeder, eating both carrion and live prey. Their diet includes insects and other invertebrates, eggs, fish, snakes, frogs, turtles, lizards, birds, small alligators and small mammals.

## Management and Protection

The decline of the caracara is primarily due to habitat loss, specifically conversion to residential development or to intensive agriculture such as row crops or citrus.

Farmers and landowners in the range of Audubon's crested caracara can be directly involved in the protection of this species by following these recommendations and precautions:

- Protect mature cabbage palms within and adjacent to tame pastures and native range areas. If caracara frequent the area, survey to identify any nest trees so that a buffer zone can be established to avoid disturbance of nesting activities. Perch trees near the nest are also important.
- In native range areas, use prescribed fire on a 2- to 3-year rotation to maintain the prairie community at an early successional stage dominated by grasses and small shrubs (palmetto, waxmyrtle, gallberry, etc.). Make sure that nest trees are protected from fire.
- In native range areas, use mechanical brush management (e.g., roller chopping, shearing, mowing, etc.) of woody vegetation in small areas (100 to 250

acres). This would be used only where the palmetto or other brush has gotten too thick or tall. Ensure that some shrub cover will remain. Avoid equipment operation within a 850 foot radius of the nest tree when active nesting is going on.

- Cattle grazing can also be beneficial in maintaining an early successional stage of vegetation favored by the caracara.
- Use care when approaching caracaras feeding on carrion along highways. Mortality from cars has been noted as a hazard, particularly with immature birds.
- Make sure all farm/ranch workers are aware of the protected status of this bird, its nesting season, and the types of nest locations.

For landowners interested in improving habitat for the crested caracara, several opportunities exist to partner with the USFWS for conservation of this species. The USFWS' "Safe Harbor" policy now provides regulatory certainty to landowners that voluntarily improve habitat on their property for federally threatened/endangered species.

If in the future, you plan to convert areas of native habitat or pasture to more intensive land uses (e.g., rangeland or pasture to crops or groves), contact NRCS for assistance in incorporating conservation practices to protect this threatened species. The NRCS works with the USFWS and FFWCC to ensure that Federal and State-listed species will not be adversely affected by actions planned by landowners. If you do not contact NRCS, please remember that the caracara is a protected species and, as a minimum, the USFWS and the FFWCC should review your proposed actions. They can be contacted at the following offices:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

(address to be inserted below by District Conservationist)

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

(address to be inserted below by District Conservationist)

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