

[NORTHERN] CRESTED CARACARA - CARACARA CHERIWAY

It was formerly considered conspecific with the southern caracara (*C. plancus*) and the extinct Guadalupe caracara (*C. lutosus*) as the "crested caracara".

Taxonomy: Kingdom: Animalia Phylum: Chordata Class: Aves Order: Falconiformes Family: Falconidae Genus: Caracara
Species: *C. cheriway*

Habitat:

Biomes: Crested Caracaras nest and forage in open areas year-round, and are found from grasslands and deserts, to rangelands and scrubby areas, from sea level to around 10,000 feet. They tend to avoid areas with thick ground cover as it prevents them from getting a running start to take flight. In some areas, they may concentrate near sources of food such as slaughterhouses, henhouses, and dumps.

Distribution:

In US: The northern caracara is a resident in Cuba, northern South America (south to northern Peru and northern Amazonian Brazil) and most of Central America and Mexico, just reaching the southernmost parts of the United States, including Florida, where it is resident but listed as threatened. There have been reports of the crested caracara as far north as San Francisco, California. and, in 2012, near Crescent City, California.

In Other Countries: Central America, Northern South America, Mexico

Holistic Description: The Crested Caracara looks like a hawk with its sharp beak and talons, behaves like a vulture, and is technically a large tropical black-and-white falcon. It is instantly recognizable standing tall on long yellow-orange legs with a sharp black cap set against a white neck and yellow-orange face. The Crested Caracara is a bird of open country and reaches only a few states in the southern U.S. It flies low on flat wings, and routinely walks on the ground.

Species Richness: NO SUBSPECIES

Population Dynamic: Preliminary population viability analysis indicates the Florida population is probably stable at present, particularly in light of new evidence indicating high productivity and nesting density in some areas, and high numbers of floaters available to replace territory holders that die.

Evolution and Systematics:

Evolution: Genus Caracara represented as fossils by three named species: *C. creightoni*, *C. latebrosus*, and *C. tellustris*, and one unnamed but possibly distinct species. Fossil records indicate that caracaras were more widespread in North America during the Pleistocene. Fossils recorded from most Pleistocene or sub-Recent deposits of southern and western U.S., including California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Florida, and T  rapa, Sonora and Nuevo Le  n, Mexico.

Systematics: Relationships within and among populations not well understood. Plumage patterns similar throughout range, perhaps averaging blacker in northern populations. Body size averages larger in north, smaller in south; size variation forms a smooth north-south cline, with no clear disjunctions. Some insular forms exhibit minor variation in size and plumage.

Monotypic. Number of subspecies recognized has varied from zero to four among authorities. Saturation of dark coloration of adults is purported to be a principal diagnostic point, but "the amount of black is subject to individual variation, and depends on stage of molt and extensive fading related to the open habitat occupied by the species"

Number of Species: NO SUBSPECIES

Number of Genera: NO SUBSPECIES

Physical Characteristics:

Size and Length: Length: 19.3-22.8 in (49-58 cm) Weight: 37.0-45.9 oz (1050-1300 g)

Wingspan: 48.0-49.2 in (122-125 cm)

Coloration: Crested Caracaras are black and white with yellow-orange legs and yellow-orange skin around the bill. Their black cap contrasts strongly with their white neck and cheeks. In flight the undertail and outer flight feathers are white. Juveniles are brown and white and lack the adult's yellow-orange legs and facial skin.

General Body Features: The Crested Caracara is a medium-sized, bulky raptor with long legs. Its flat head is topped with a shaggy crest. In flight, note its long, straight wings and diamond-shaped tail. The bill is heavy with a sharp tip.

Special Features of the Body: But the Crested Caracara (*Caracara cheriway*) is not your typical falcon. Although the Caracara has the hooked raptorial bill and some other similarities to its cousins, other anatomical and behavioral features set this bird far apart.

Special Features of the Head and Sensory Organs: Like vultures, the Caracara has some featherless skin on its face. This is an adaptation to eating dead animals. Facial feathers would get fouled up by blood and fleshy bits during meals, so it's helpful for scavengers to have few if any of them.

Dentition: BEAK/LAMELLAE/GIZZARD

Special Features of the Limbs and Digits: Caracaras tend to either fly low or walk on the ground while foraging. In fact, they spend a lot of time walking around, which is rare among raptors. This is why they have such long legs for a falcon and claws that are relatively flat.

Any Special Internal Anatomy: NONE

Sexual Dimorphisms: Average weight is higher in the north of the range, smaller in the tropics. In Florida, 21 male birds averaged 1,117 g (2.463 lb) and 18 female birds averaged 1,200 g (2.6 lb). In Panama, males were found to average 834 g (1.839 lb) and females averaged 953 g (2.101 lb).

Differences Between Juvenile Stage and Adult: Sexes are similar, but immature birds are browner, have a buff neck and throat, a pale breast streaked/mottled with brown, greyish-white legs and greyish or dull pinkish-purple facial skin and cere. The voice of this species is a low rattle.

Behavior:

Diurnal, Nocturnal, or Crepuscular: Diurnal

Activity: Crested Caracaras regularly walk or run on the ground. To get airborne they take a few running steps, lifting gently into the air. Once in flight, they fly with strong and slow wingbeats with their wings held flat, scanning for prey below. They keep territories year-round and are not social with other birds other than their mate during the breeding season. Breeding birds tend to be more aggressive toward other Crested Caracaras and vultures at carcass sites, but seem more tolerant outside the breeding season and even roost communally at times. Pairs form year-round bonds with each other and stay together for several years. Pairs and family groups frequently preen each other, a behavior known as allopreening. Pairs maintain strict territorial boundaries, quickly chasing away intruders from the nest site during the breeding season. They are faithful to the nest site and return to the same site and sometimes the same tree year after year.

Locomotion: Regularly walk about on the ground in search of prey or to gather nesting materials. Their long legs and tail appear to enable relatively efficient walking. Steps are slow and deliberate, the body is erect and the neck extended. They often pause to scan the sky or ground. When searching for prey, their head is bent forward, and their gaze is directed toward ground. Caracaras frequently scratch at the ground or flip over debris or cowpats with one foot. They are strong runners; run in pursuit of prey and generally take a few short running steps when taking off in flight. When gliding, can be distinguished by mostly flat positioning of wings like Bald Eagles, but with a very slight “M” shape created by the birds holding their wrists very slightly higher than the top of the back and slightly higher than the wing tips. The positioning is similar to that of soaring Osprey but far more subtle. Confusion is minimized because Caracaras are rarely observed gliding with either Bald Eagles or Osprey.

Communication and Perception: Crested Caracaras are mostly silent, but when disturbed, they occasionally make a hollow rattling that sounds similar to running a stick along a fence. They throw their heads back, lifting their bills to the sky while giving a rattle. They tend to be more vocal during the breeding season.

Home Range: Breeding adults actively defend nesting territory, particularly within 100 m of nest; most aggressively against conspecifics. Territory maintained by 1 or both adults of pair perched high on telephone pole or tree, scanning the surroundings, sometimes at a distance from nest. If an intruder is sighted, Caracara immediately gives rapid chase until the intruder is driven from the area. At what appear to be territory “boundaries,” members of adjacent pairs can be seen chasing, circling, diving at each other until 1 pair retreats.

Degree of Sociality: Breeding adults show little social behavior. They are highly intolerant of adult conspecifics in their territory, although in Florida nests can be as close together as 1.5 km and adjacent home ranges show up to 10% overlap. Family groups remain together for several months. During 1994-1996, 25% of juveniles remained in their respective natal territories until adults commenced breeding the following year.

Level of Aggression: Breeding adults near nest may show defensive reactions to nearby conspecifics. If immature is on the ground, adult generally runs or flies toward it with legs and feet extended. At a carcass, adults may approach a conspecific and attempt to drive it away by running toward it with wings outstretched. Captive adult male caracara elicited threat display and repeated stoops from both wild adults when tethered near nest.

Migration: Resident. Nonmigratory (resident) throughout its range.

Predators:

Predators: Fish Crows, Raccoons, Fire Ants.

Anti-Predator Defenses: Adults direct Rattle and Cackle vocalizations at potential predators near the nest and may fly around the nest while also calling, but do not directly attack. When disturbed during nesting, adults often perch on a nearby tree or cactus, breaking off twigs or flowers, perhaps in redirected aggression. Most breeding birds are inconspicuous year round, flying low into the nest, perching far from it, and not vocalizing. When humans approach a nest, caracaras do not attempt

physical contact and usually fly rapidly away; rarely dive. Response to a non-human predator at the nest has not been documented.

Diet and Nutrition:

Adult Diet: Though Crested Caracaras are thought to eat primarily carrion they also eat live prey including insects, fish, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and mammals. Crested Caracaras are resourceful foragers and eat just about anything they can find. They wade in shallow waters to grab fish, dig up turtle eggs with their feet, and turn over debris with feet to uncover insects. Crested Caracaras also take advantage of disturbance such as fires or farming operations, grabbing fleeing animals or picking up those that have died. They watch for vultures and often join them to feed on carrion. Because Crested Caracaras cannot open large carcasses on their own they must wait for a vulture or larger animal to open it up. Unlike most raptors that pounce on prey, caracaras generally fly or run on the ground toward their prey until they overtake it.

Juvenile Diet: ^^^^^

Special Adaptations for Getting Prey: CHECK FEATURES

Reproduction:

Mode of Reproduction: Monogamous

Mating System: Apparent monogamy, though genetic analyses to search for evidence of extra pair copulations with adjacent territory holders or with vagrant “non-breeding” birds have not been undertaken. One breeding adult female is known to have dispersed 3.2 km to a new territory, but it is not known whether she paired with the same or a new individual.

Mating Season: September to July

Courtship: Transfer of prey between members of a pair often precedes copulation; this is sometimes accompanied by wuck or food-begging (cre-ak) call. One adult observed flying about nest stand, carrying nesting material that was not delivered to the nest.

Territoriality: HOME RANGE

Mating: Copulatory and mounting behavior observed year-round. Prior to copulation, male pumps tail up and down; female assumes no consistent precopulatory pose. Copulations are frequent, even after clutch is initiated. Copulation consists of the male approaching the female from the side, mounting with feet clenched and flapping wings to stay upright. Female's head and tail are lowered; male's tail is directed down while female's tail moves left or right for cloacal contact. Copulation occurs most often during morning and evening; period of cloacal contact averaged 4–5 s.

Nesting: Crested Caracaras generally build a nest in the tallest tree, cactus, shrub, or other structure around. Males and females collect stems, twigs, and vines that they weave into a bulky nest with a shallow bowl. It takes the pair around 2 to 4 weeks to build a nest. Nests are approximately 2 feet across, but they frequently reuse and refurbish old nests, so they are often larger.

Egg-Laying: Clutch Size: 1-4 eggs Number of Broods: 1-2 broods Egg Length: 2.1-2.7 in (5.3-6.8 cm) Egg Width: 1.4-2.4 in (3.5-6 cm) Incubation Period: 30-33 days Nestling Period: 42-56 days Egg Description: Cinnamon-colored with heavy brown spotting.

Hatching and Incubation/Gestation: Helpless and covered in down. Semi-altricial and nidicolous; downy, eyes slightly open, egg tooth present, barely capable of sitting and holding head erect to beg for food.

Development: NONE

Parental Care: By both male and female. Chicks often not brooded even when very young, although adults may perch at some distance from but within sight of the nest. After 4 wk, adults may be away from nest for up to 2 h during the day. Diet includes vertebrates, invertebrates, and carrion, although young are fed more live-caught prey than carrion. Male and female provide food, but female feeds young more than male does. Male does most of the foraging. Adults do not feed by regurgitation as do vultures but tear up prey and feed young directly until they are 4–5 wk old. Thereafter, adults often drop food in nest and leave immediately.

Lifespan: Around 9 years in the wild.

Conservation:

Official Federal Status: Least Concern

Special Statutes in Individual States: NONE

Threats: Crested Caracaras are not frequently encountered in the U.S., but they are common south of the border. In the United States, access to areas where they breed can affect researchers' ability to estimate population trends. Based on the best available data, the North American Breeding Bird Survey suggests that their populations increased by 6% per year between 1966 and 2015. Partners in Flight estimates the global breeding population at 2 million. The species rates an 8 out of 20 on the Continental Concern Score, which means it is not on the Partners in Flight Watch List and is a species of low conservation concern. However, because Crested Caracaras occupy only a small area in the U.S., Florida and Arizona lists the

species as threatened. Increases in ranching, dumps, and poultry farms in some parts of their range may provide beneficial foraging opportunities for Crested Caracaras, but they also face the loss and degradation of nesting areas throughout their range.

Conservation Efforts: ^^^^^^

Extra Facts:

1. A common subject of folklore and legends throughout Central and South America, the Crested Caracara is sometimes called the "Mexican eagle."
2. Although it looks like a long-legged hawk the Crested Caracara is actually a falcon.
3. The Crested Caracara is the only falcon that collects material to build a nest. Other falcons lay their eggs in an old nest built by another species or in a scrape on the ground.
4. The oldest recorded Crested Caracara was at least 21 years, 9 months old when it was identified by its band in 2015 in Florida. It was first banded in the same state in 1994.
5. A.K.A. Audubon's caracara.

Notable Species: NONE