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Caracaras thrive on Buck Island Ranch

By ARCHBOLD BIOLOGICAL STATION

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Dr. Joan Morrison holds a Crested Caracara, ready for release after being fitted with a solar-powered location transmitter . DUSTIN ANGELL PHOTO

When Dr. Joan Morrison first arrived at Buck Island Ranch as a University of Florida graduate student studying Crested Caracaras, she had no idea that after nearly 30 years she would still be

coming to the Ranch to study these unique birds of prey. Caracaras are native to Florida and are easily recognizable with their orange faces, yellow legs, and jaunty black caps.

They can often be seen in our region perched on fence posts or flying along roads searching for carrion. One of Morrison's initial findings was that Caracaras really like cattle ranches, in fact they thrive in these habitats, which also support many other wildlife species such as wading birds, deer, Indigo Snakes, Gopher Tortoises, Red-shouldered Hawks, and even panthers and bears. Over the years Morrison has successfully partnered with many ranchers in south-central Florida.

According to Morrison, "Caracaras really like improved pasture habitat, they get along well with cattle and all the activities associated with managing a ranch such as burning, mowing and, of course cattle grazing." These pasture habitats are increasingly being converted to something else, for example, urban development and other agriculture, so the Caracara population is listed as threatened due to habitat loss.

Buck Island Ranch has at least a half a dozen pairs of Caracaras nesting on the property. Pairs typically use the same nest tree from year to year and can raise as many as three chicks. Their nesting season is primarily during Florida's winter months, so March is a very active month during which many young Caracaras are ready to leave the nest.

Caracaras are very social and after the young birds leave their home territory, they often congregate in groups, feeding together and roaming throughout south-central Florida seeking food and pasture habitats. Along with carrion, which can be easily found along roads, Caracaras eat a variety of vertebrates including lizards, snakes, birds, rabbits, mice, and turtles, and invertebrates including worms, beetles, larvae, and even ants.

Recently, Morrison has returned to Florida to capture nesting Caracaras. She explained, "The purpose of this research is to band the birds and fit them with solar-powered transmitters. These transmitters will collect location data that will provide needed information on where the Caracaras feed during the day and roost at night. Because I can track the Caracaras' movements via the Internet, I can begin to understand how these birds respond to the land use changes ongoing throughout this region of Florida."

Capturing Caracaras requires permits from agencies, and very specific procedures, as these are very smart birds! Morrison remarked, “The birds remember a capture experience so each individual can only be captured once, thus great care must be taken in preparation for these activities. The data these birds provide are invaluable and seeing one of these beautiful birds up close is well worth it!”

Dr. Joan Morrison presented her Caracara research for the virtual event ‘East to West: Comparing species at the East Foundation in Texas and Archbold Biological Station in Florida.’ Visit Archbold’s YouTube page to watch: <https://youtu.be/fSLuPqpsOdw>



This Caracara was banded on Buck Island Ranch in November 2008 and Paul Gray still sees her regularly near his office in Lorida, about 20 miles north of the Ranch. PAUL GRAY PHOTO

A Moody