

# STORK, OPENBILL

## **RANGE:**

Mainland tropical Africa, from northern areas of Somalia, Kenya, Chad and Ethiopia, west to Mali and Senegal, and south to South Africa and Madagascar.

## **HABITAT:**

Tends to seek out aquatic habitats, more so than many other members of the stork family. Frequently found around swamps, flood plains, rice fields, river shallows, the edges of lakes, and other wet or moist areas. Often forages among floating vegetation and has even been seen walking on the backs of hippopotami. Roosts and rests communally in trees at night, preferring large bare trees, near shorelines of streams, lakes or swamps.

## **SIZE:**

**Wingspan:** 34 inches

**Height:** 24 inches

**Weight:** 2 3/4 lbs.

## **LIFE EXPECTANCY:**

Unknown

## **REPRODUCTION:**

The openbill stork is considered a trans-equatorial migrant which generally breeds in wet areas south of the equator and moves north of the equator in the dry season. Openbills will usually congregate during the rainy season in trees along flood plain areas or areas that are inundated with water. The openbills can often be found associated with other waterfowl, such as ibises, herons, and other storks. Breeding areas vary from year to year, and sites tend to be picked according to habitat conditions dictated by the weather.

Males pick a suitable site for nesting and then begin performing an "advertising" display to attract a female. This display usually involves a swaying motion with a pointing of the beak up and down between the feet. Once a pair forms, both male and female will perform an up and down display, arching necks forwards and back with bills widely opened. Loud, raucous calls usually accompany this courtship behavior. Both male and female build the nest and continue to add to it as incubation takes place. Nests are kept wet or moist by regurgitated water from each of the nesting pair. Generally 2 to 5 eggs will be laid at 2 day intervals and incubation lasts about 25 to 30 days. Both sexes incubate the eggs. Breeding and laying periods vary throughout the birds range, however most nesting occurs at the height of the rainy season in a given area, which tends to correspond with the emergence from aestivation of Pila snails, which is a major food source of the storks. During dry season months the prey item that is most easily caught are freshwater mussels, which may be inadequate food for regular breeding. Young are voracious eaters and are capable of ingesting large meals. By around 15 days it would not be unusual for a baby stork to be able to eat close to its own weight in snails in a 24 hour period. The preferred food of the young birds is snails, anything else usually must be force fed by the parents. Parents feed the young by regurgitating food into the nest and the young then pick it up. Water is also brought to the chicks by the adults and regurgitated into their mouths, and at the same time the nest is kept moist. Up until about 20 days, only one adult will leave the nest to gather food and water at a time. After about 20 days the young may be left on their own for short periods of time while the adults feed. Flight feathers begin to appear at around 25 days, and the body is generally completely covered with feathers at around 40 days. Fledging takes place at around 50 to 55 days.

## **DIET:**

**Wild:** Snails, freshwater mussels.

**Zoo:** Fish, mice, soaked dog chow, bird of prey diet.

# theZOO

LOUISVILLE



photo: Robert Kemnitz

Order:	<b>Ciconiiformes</b>
Family:	<b>Ciconiidae</b>
Genus:	<b>Anastomus</b>
Species:	<b>lamelligerus</b>

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### **BEHAVIOR:**

This highly recognizable, medium-sized, black stork has a most distinguishing feature in that its bill has a curved lower mandible that leaves a visible gap in the center of the beak of adult birds. The upper and lower mandible only meet at the tip of the bill. This unusual shape is probably an adaptation for catching and feeding on snails and mussels, the main food items of the open-billed stork in the wild. When feeding, the stork holds the snail underwater, pinning it down with the tip of the upper mandible while the lower blade-like mandible is inserted into the shell to cut the snail loose, leaving the shell intact. When feeding on mussels, the lower mandible is forced between the two halves of the shell near the hinge, cutting the main muscle that holds the shell closed and the animal is consumed as the shell falls open.

During migration travels, flocks of openbills can be seen using thermals to gain height, and then gliding on them for hours. These storks have the ability to travel great distances by direct flapping flight, and will cross large bodies of water through alternately flapping and gliding. Individuals have also been observed to drop very quickly, by folding in their wings, a behavior that seems to have no real explanation. At times, openbills move around in large flocks and will invade a rice field, swamp or stream bank very quickly, a habit that is not welcomed by agricultural peoples. Flocks will often leave an area just as suddenly as they arrive, at times leaving some individuals behind.

### **STATUS:**

Population Stable

### **REFERENCES:**

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