

A FIRST STATE RECORD OF A CRESTED CARACARA (*CARACARA CHERIWAY*) IN ALABAMA

Robert A. Duncan and Lucy R. Duncan

On 19 February 2001, David Plumb of Baldwin County, Alabama observed a Crested Caracara (*Caracara cheriway*) in his yard and was able to record it on videotape for two minutes. If accepted by the Alabama Bird Records Committee (ABRC), this sighting will constitute the first Alabama record of this species. The Crested Caracara ranges from central and southern Texas and southwestern Louisiana, southern Arizona and northern Baja California, Cuba, south through Middle and South America (AOU 1983). A disjunct population, estimated at a minimum of 400-500 individuals in 1991 (Layne, in Stevenson and Anderson 1994) exists in south central Florida.

Mr. Plumb contacted Larry Gardella who called us about the occurrence. On the phone that evening, Mr. Plumb described the bird and offered to provide the ABRC with a copy of his video. We have known David Plumb for a number of years as he permits us access to his family property during the Gulf Shores Christmas Bird Counts. He is a duck hunter with good knowledge of waterfowl and raptors.

The following day, 20 February, we visited his home located about one mile (1.6 km) SW of the intersection of Baldwin County roads 49 and 12. The area is open terrain in sod fields and pasture with copses of trees and hedgerows scattered throughout. The house near which the bird was seen is in an open expanse of grasses with a swampy area, dry at the time, and bare trees about 100-150 ft. (30-45 m) to the south, where the bird was filmed. A search for the bird was unsuccessful. The tape showed the Caracara with recognizable features of Mr. Plumb's yard and trees as reference points. Mr. Plumb first noticed the bird and a Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) feeding on a duck carcass. When he approached, the Caracara flew off before the Red-tailed Hawk. Mr. Plumb was able to film the Caracara after it flew into a nearby bare tree, while it sat and turned around on the branch, and then as it flew away from the area. In all, the video showed every feature of a Crested Caracara. Subsequent efforts to find the bird by several birders over the next few days were unsuccessful.

Interestingly on the morning of 1 March 2001, we observed a Crested Caracara at the extreme eastern tip of Santa Rosa Island, Okaloosa County, Florida, near Destin. This area consists of a parking lot, beach dunes, a brackish

lake ringed with juncus, and an adjacent marsh beyond which are dunes and the Gulf of Mexico on the south and a stand of pines, many of which are dead, to the west. The bird was perched on dead branches emerging from the top of a live yaupon (*Ilex vomitoria*) no more than 100 ft. (30 m) from the parking area. The Caracara flew down into the thick brush networked with narrow paths soon after we pulled into the parking lot. Efforts to find it were futile.

Whether the Alabama bird was the same individual that we spotted in Destin cannot be determined, but we suspect one bird is involved. While the origin of both sightings may never be known, whether from Peninsula Florida or the more western Texas population, we are convinced neither bird was an escape. Lowery (1974) writes "the birds are not easy to find...for they spend much of their time on the ground and have the habit of retreating behind a mass of vegetation or one of the many pimple mounds in the area when an observer approaches." This behavior explains how the Destin bird was able to disappear so quickly. No Crested Caracaras were reported from The Zoo in Gulf Breeze, Florida near Pensacola, the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo in Gulf Shores, or from the Kids Kountry Farm in Magnolia Springs, Alabama.

In both instances the birds exhibited wild behavior unlike a bird that would have been in captivity. The Alabama Caracara flew off before the Red-tailed Hawk, which is typically a rather shy bird. The Florida bird opted for hiding on the ground, a characteristic of a species that spends a good deal of time hunting on the ground.

In Louisiana, the Crested Caracara is considered a rare permanent resident, primarily in Cameron Parish in the southwest part of the state (Lowery 1974). The easternmost record in Louisiana includes a bird that was killed in 1973 in the New Orleans area after it attacked a child and a neighbor's dog. It was considered wild (Lowery 1974). The closest occurrence to the Alabama sighting was a bird photographed in Jackson County, Mississippi, in 1983 (Toups and Jackson 1987). The closest occurrence to the Destin sighting was a bird seen in the Panama City, Florida area in August 1968 (Ingram 2001). It was considered an escape at the time.

We believe the Alabama sighting constitutes the first state occurrence, pending acceptance by the ABRC to which the videotape has been sent.

LITERATURE CITED

- AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION. 1983. Check-list of North American Birds. 6th ed. Amer. Ornithol. Union, Washington, D. C.

- INGRAM, R. 2001. Birds of Bay and Gulf Counties, Florida. Bay County Audubon Society, Inc., Panama City, Florida.
- LOWERY, G. H., Jr. 1974. Louisiana birds. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.
- STEVENSON, H. M. and B. H. ANDERSON. 1994. The birdlife of Florida. University Press of Florida, Gainesville, Florida.
- TOUPS, J. A. and J. A. JACKSON. 1987. Birds and birding on the Mississippi coast. University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, Mississippi.

Robert A. Duncan and Lucy R. Duncan, 614 Fairpoint Dr., Gulf Breeze, FL 32561