

The Northern Crested Caracara

“A Florida Bird”

The Northern crested caracara is a raptor residing in central Florida. They are larger birds with a black back, wings, and cap giving them the name “crested”. They have a white head, white patches on the wings, and white band on the tail. Their chest is barred and adults have yellowish legs and beaks while juveniles have blue legs and beaks. Caracaras nest in cabbage palms in open prairies and improved pastures. They nest from October to May and lay 1 to 2 eggs in January. Pairs mate for life and will return to the same nest every year.

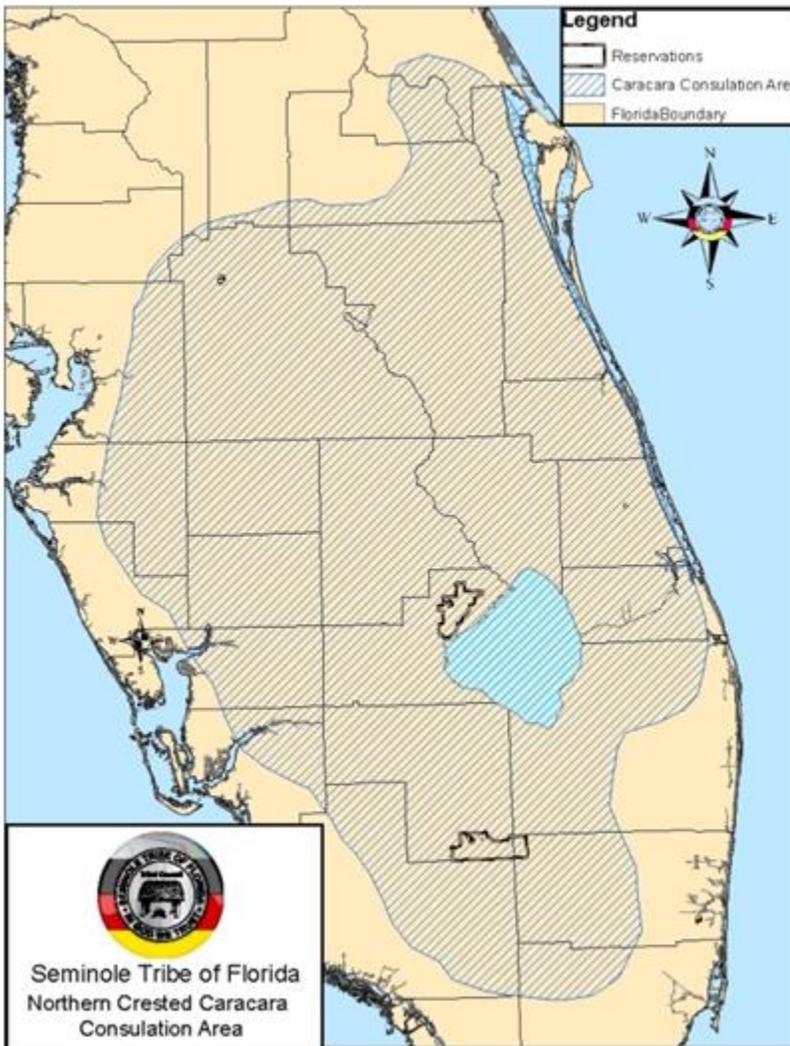


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Although the caracara has been called the “Mexican Eagle” there is fossil evidence that caracaras have been in North America since before the Pleistocene (more than 20,000 years ago). According to Joan Morrison, a Professor of Biology at Trinity College and caracara researcher, the fossil records show that caracaras once ranged from the Rancho La Brea tar pits in California to Arizona, and New Mexico. They have also been found on the Gulf coast of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. Fossil records have even been found from the ice age periods and even older fossils have been found in Nebraska of a now extinct related caracara species.

This information suggests that much of the continent consisted of grasslands and was warmer before the ice age. It is suspected that the current caracara populations have been “pushed back” south by the expanding glaciers. After the last glacial period, when northern Florida became forested, the only habitat left for the caracaras in Florida were the great prairies. This has created a Florida population of crested caracaras isolated from the populations which still exist in Texas, Mexico, and Central America.



The crested caracara is protected under the Endangered Species Act in 1987 due to loss of habitat and population decline. The US Fish and Wildlife Service have developed a consultation area for the caracara based on habitat. Much of the dry prairie habitat in Florida has been destroyed or modified for agriculture and residential development. However, large cattle ranching operations seem to be compatible with caracara nesting and survival. Caracaras have also experienced population decline due to vehicular collisions. Caracaras are scavengers and can often be found on the side of the road with vultures feeding on road kill, therefore making them more prone to becoming road kill themselves.

In the end, these birds still thrive in Florida and are true survivalist. No matter what nature brings at them and the habitat changes they have been through, the northern crested caracara adapts and continues to inhabit improved pastures on the reservations. However, we must still make strides to keep this Florida population healthy. To aid in the effort, the Environmental Resource Management Department Wildlife staff conducts crested caracara surveys on the Brighton and Big Cypress Reservation from October to May. If you have any questions, the Environmental Resource Management Department will be happy to answer them. You can submit your questions or comments to ermdwildife@semtribe.com.