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## Limpkin *Aramus guarauna*

The Limpkin is an endemic wading bird found in certain freshwater habitats statewide. It is readily observed, being large (1 kg), very vocal, and quite approachable.

**Habitat.** Typical breeding habitats for Limpkins are rivers, lakes, and marshes with large apple snail populations.

In addition to apple snails, Limpkins eat other aquatic snails and bivalves, all of which they find by sight or touch and open with impressive efficiency.

Most nesting in southern Florida occurs from early February through May and in central and northern Florida from late February through June, with double-clutching common. Courtship feeding of the female by the male imitates an adult feeding a juvenile. Males defend the breeding territory by chasing male intruders in flight, with ritualistic boundary encounters, and with occasional feet-fighting; females sometimes challenge other females and juveniles (Ingalls 1972).

Limpkins nest in some of the widest variety of situations imaginable. Nests can be very exposed or well hidden. The nest can be located in slowly sinking piles of aquatic vegetation, in clumps of bulrush in the open water, between cypress knees, in dense riverside tangles of branches and vines, on high branches of cypress trees, in cypress tree cavities, or in the tops of sabal palms. The nest is constructed of any loose materials that can be pulled from the immediate vicinity and can be comprised of all sticks, all aquatic reeds, a Spanish moss, or any mixture of materials. Some nest locations are used year after year (Bryan 1981).

Limpkins typically lay 5 to 7 eggs. Incubation is for about 27 days (Walkinshaw 1982), with only females incubating at night. The downy young hatch simultaneously, or almost so, and leave the nest as soon as all are hatched. The parents build a secondary feeding platform out of aquatic vegetation, which becomes the new center of activity. An adult feeds 1 juvenile until satiated, while other juveniles stand calmly nearby. After approximately 9 to 10 weeks, juveniles forage independently. Juvenile males establish subterritories within the natal territory and, after about 13 weeks are chased from the parents' territory. A juvenile male may remain or assume his parents' territory if the male parent disappears. Both yearling males and females successfully breed.

Parental duties are fully shared from nest-building through feeding of the young. However, after several weeks caring for the young, females commonly detach themselves from the family and wander within and between territories. They may re-mate with the same male for a second clutch or desert the territory to mate with a nearby unpaired territorial male.

Males give territorial "kreow" calls all year and counter call characteristically with neighboring males. During the breeding season, unpaired territorial males give long series of repetitious "kow" calls, often late at night. Females are much less vocal and give distinctly different "gon" calls, usually as an antiphonal duet to their mates' calls during breeding season.



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**Seasonal Occurrence.** In northern and central Florida, most Limpkin males are year-round residents on perennial inviolate territories. Females of mated pairs on the highest quality territories may also remain on the territory throughout the year. However, some males that control poorer quality territories and most females migrate to unknown locations after the breeding season and are absent from the breeding colonies for several months. Color-banded individuals are known to have returned to the same territories and re-mated in the next season. Large autumn and winter congregations of Limpkins in the Lake Okeechobee/Everglades region are suspected to include migrants (Bryan 1996).

**Status.** Limpkins are locally common where apple snails are abundant. However, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Limpkins were heavily hunted and greatly reduced in numbers except in more remote locations. Wetland drainage in Florida also has reduced usable habitat, especially in the northern Everglades, upper St. Johns River Valley, and the Kissimmee River Valley (Nicholson 1928). Breeding Bird Survey data indicate a decline from 1966 through 1993, although recent years are relatively stable. The Limpkin is listed as a Species Special Concern by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission [editor: now Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission] (Wood 1996). Appropriate wetlands for apple snails are more abundant in central and southern Florida, as is reflected in the Limpkin breeding distribution map. Northern breeding populations are found along spring-fed rivers with lush, submerged aquatic vegetation.

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Sponsored by Nannie Christian

# Limpkin

