

Foraging Relationships of Wading Birds in the Everglades Estuary

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Wading bird populations of southern Florida use both inland and coastal-estuarine ecosystems. Species of storks, ibis and egrets differ in habitat utilization within the coastal estuarine area. Nesting and feeding locations, and selection of food vary among and within species on a yearly and monthly basis. These aspects of habitat use reflect food availability, which determines patterns of annual productivity. Wading bird colonies supported by marine and estuarine feeding areas are consistently small and relatively successful. Inland colonies are relatively large but are successful only intermittently. Estuarine colonies are larger and more successful in years when

nesting birds are able to use inland feeding sites. In other years when only coastal and estuarine feeding sites are available, species nesting, numbers nesting and nesting success are limited. The role of the coastal-estuarine environment, on a regional basis, appears to be in providing feeding and nesting habitat for relatively consistent but low productivity in wading birds and their prey populations. This habitat may be vital in maintaining the population levels of some species above critically low numbers, especially through years in which the inland ecosystem is unable to support successful wading birds nesting.