

**ARIZONA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT  
HERITAGE DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

**Animal Abstract**

**Element Code:** ABNKD02020

**Data Sensitivity:** Yes

**CLASSIFICATION, NOMENCLATURE, DESCRIPTION, RANGE**

**NAME:** *Caracara plancus*  
**COMMON NAME:** Crested Caracara  
**SYNONYMS:** *Caracara cheriway*  
*Falco plancus*  
*Caracara plancus auduboni*  
*C. plancus audubonii*  
*Polyborus plancus*  
*P. plancus audubonii*  
**OTHER COMMON NAMES:** Caracara  
Common Caracara  
Northern Caracara  
Mexican buzzard  
**FAMILY:** Falconidae

**AUTHOR, PLACE OF PUBLICATION:** *Caracara plancus* (Jacquin). *Falco plancus* Jacquin, Beytr. Gesch. Vög., 1784, p. 17, pl. 4. (auf der Insel Aruba, an der Küste von Venezuela=Aruba).

**TYPE LOCALITY:** Auf der Insel Aruba, an der Küste von Venezuela=Aruba.

**TYPE SPECIMEN:**

**TAXONOMIC UNIQUENESS:** *Caracara plancus* was previously split as *C. plancus* and *C. cheriway* (Banks et al. 2000, del Hoyo et al. 2014) based on analyses of plumage, morphology, and reported hybridization by Dove and Banks (1999). Based on extensive hybridization in the contact zone in Amazonia, clinal variation in phenotype, and an apparent lack of barriers to gene flow (Dove and Banks 1999, Fuchs et al. 2012), *C. cheriway* was subsequently treated as conspecific with *C. plancus* (Chesser et al. 2021).

**DESCRIPTION:** A medium-sized diurnal raptor with a hooked bill, long legs, long wings (bent back at the wrist in flight), large head, and long neck. They reach 19–25 inches (49–64 cm) in length, 45–52 inches (116–132.0 cm) in wingspan, and 1.5–3.5 pounds (700–1,600 g) in weight (Morrison 1996, Morrison and Dwyer 2023). Sexes are monomorphic; the female is slightly larger in overall measurements. The adults both have attractive black and white plumage, while immature birds are brown and sandy or buff. Specifically, the head is slightly flattened, with a prominent black cap; occipital feathers somewhat elongated to form crest. The reddish-orange

to yellowish-orange face (bare facial skin), contrasting with the black erectile crest and otherwise white head and neck is quite distinctive (Morrison 1996, Morrison and Dwyer 2023). The lower back, abdomen, wings are brownish black to black. Sides of the head, throat, breast, upper back, and undertail-coverts are buffy white; tips of feathers on upper back and breast are horizontally barred and spotted with brownish black. The tail is buffy white with 10–12 brownish black bars and broad, dark, terminal bands. When perched, the wingtips do not extend beyond the long tail. The legs are yellow-orange in color; the lores, malar, and suborbital regions are naked with sparse fine bristles. The long legs, rather flat feet, and extended, only slightly decurved claws indicate its terrestrial habits (Morrison 1996, Morrison and Dwyer 2023). The upper tarsi are feathered brownish black to black; the lower tarsi and toes are yellow; claws are black. The pale bluish bill is deep vertically and compressed; eyes are dull orange-brown. In flight, they have a proportionately longer neck and tail and a more “streamlined” shape than most other raptors (Morrison 1996, Morrison and Dwyer 2023). The distinctive white wing windows are visible when viewed from below. (Levy 1998).

Juveniles are browner; upperparts are edged and spotted with buff; underparts streaked with buff, unlike adult barring (National Geographic 2002).

**AIDS TO IDENTIFICATION:** All of the following characteristics are unique to this species: black crown, white neck, black belly, whitish tail with black band at end, and a white patch at the end of the dark wings. The Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) has a similar white wing panel on dark wings, but is otherwise quite different in shape and coloration.

**ILLUSTRATIONS:** Color drawing (Richard Sloan *in* Glinski 1998: p. 24)  
Color photo (Udvardy and Farrand, Jr. 1994: pl. 324)  
Color photo (Morrison 1996)  
Color Photo (Morrison and Dwyer 2023)  
Color drawings (Sibley 2000: p. 129)  
Color drawings (National Geographic 2002: p. 121)

**TOTAL RANGE:** Baja California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas south through México and Central America to Perú, Columbia, Venezuela, Aruba, Curacao, Bonaire, Trinidad, and Surinam; central Florida south to Cuba and the Isle of Pines (Morrison and Dwyer 2023).

**RANGE WITHIN ARIZONA:** Baboquivari, Cerro Colorado, and North Comobabi mountains, and Baboquivari, Gu Oidak, Santa Rosa, Sells, and Tecolote valleys, Pima County. Their known range is almost entirely on the Tohono O’odham Nation. They appear to avoid the mountains and foothills (Levy 1998). Scattered reports of mainly nonbreeding individuals range as far north as Phoenix, and as far east as New Mexico (Glinski 1995). Formerly reported around Tucson and upper Santa Cruz Valley, though no confirmed breeding records exist (Morrison 1996). Confirmed nesting records from Tohono O’odham Nation (Pinal and Pima counties), and may also be breeding in Olen Wash area (Pinal County) north of Oracle Junction and in the Silverbell Mountains (Morrison and Dwyer 2023).

## **SPECIES BIOLOGY AND POPULATION TRENDS**

**BIOLOGY:** Morphologically allied with the falcons (Falconidae), the Crested Caracara is a diurnal non-migratory bird that maintains a large territory, usually with a mate. Adult pairs are generally monogamous and highly territorial, and exhibit strong site fidelity (Morrison and Dwyer 2023). Home range width of breeding adults in Florida varied from 4.6–9.8 km, averaging 6 km (Morrison 1996). Consistently gregarious, immature birds often congregate in groups, sometimes roosting and feeding with vultures. In the non-breeding season, they may aggregate in groups of up to 10, especially at sites where carrion is present (Morrison and Dwyer 2023).

Birds that have been observed using occupied caracara nest saguaros include: American Kestrels (*Falco sparverius*), Western Screech-owls (*Otus kennicottii*), Gila Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes uropygialis*), Northern Flickers (*Colaptes auratus*), Purple Martins (*Progne subis*), and Cactus Wrens (*Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus*) (Morrison 1996).

Their long, strong legs and “flat” feet enable them to walk and run with considerable agility and speed; often referred to as the ground dwelling falcon. Their normal flight is direct, swift, and low, at about the height of the local vegetation (Morrison and Dwyer 2023).

Vocalization has been described by some, as a harsh grating sound like two pieces of wood being rubbed together; others have described an *eh-eh-eh* sound like someone clearing their throat. Still others have described the caracara’s call as rattlelike. When Levy (1998) disturbed a nest, he described the sound made by the pair, as resembling a stick being run along a picket fence. “The call sounds like mandibles clacking rapidly together, but it is a true vocalization.” The call is followed by a head toss, and the action is then repeated. Birds are mostly silent, unless disturbed at the nest (Morrison and Dwyer 2023). Outside of nesting season, birds are silent except in social feeding situations. Juveniles beg with a hoarse or wheezy scream.

**REPRODUCTION:** Adults generally use the same nest from year to year, adding new material every year (Morrison and Dwyer 2023). One nest observed was 6–7 feet deep. “In Arizona, they are commonly found nesting in saguaros, in the lower swirl of the arms, between 10–14 feet above the ground. The nests are constructed of fine twigs and stems of burweed, snakeweed, wolfberry, and triangleleaf bursage.” (Levy 1998, Jenness 2015).

Egg laying occurs late January-early June (peak March-April) in Texas, March-August in Mexico. In Arizona, the breeding period occurs between March and July (Jenness 2015). By May, most pairs have eggs that will hatch in early June. Caracaras normally lay 2 (1–3) brown-speckled eggs; usually one brood per season (Jenness 2015). They often renest following failed attempt. Incubation lasts about 30–32 days, by both sexes but probably mostly by the female. The young are tended by both parents, and leave the nest at about 8 weeks of age (Morrison and Dwyer 2023). Levy (1998) reports that young fledge in Arizona at five weeks of age, usually in the second week of July. The family group stays together about 2–3 months after

fledging. At the next breeding season, remaining young are chased out of the territory by adults (Morrison and Dwyer 2023).

**FOOD HABITS:** They feed opportunistically on carrion and associated insect larvae, various live vertebrates, insects, and worms (Bent 1938, Evans 1982). They commonly utilize road kills, and may rob food from other species such as vultures. (Morrison 1996). In Arizona, many *Phrynosoma* remains have been found near nests. Paired adults often share food. Occasionally drinks from shallow ponds, wetlands, and ditches (Morrison and Dwyer 2023).

**HABITAT:** Open and semi-open habitats below 3,000 m elevation, including pastureland, cultivated areas, and semidesert, in both arid and moist habitats but more commonly in the former (Morrison and Dwyer 2023). Habitat characterized by low-profile ground vegetation and scattered tall vegetation suitable for nesting. Scattered trees, poles, and fences with unimpeded view favored as perches, particularly near nest sites (Morrison 1996). In Arizona, inhabits paloverde-saguaro desert. “They can frequently be found near stock tanks and *charcos*, especially during the hot, dry summer. Perhaps they are attracted by the numerous dead livestock found around the only water available for miles.” (Levy 1998).

Nests in trees, usually in site concealed among branches, or in cacti; 2.5–15+ m (8.2–49 ft) above the ground. In treeless areas, they may nest on rock ledges or under overhanging rocks, or on the ground in secluded sites such as marsh islands.

**ELEVATION:** 1,890–3,360 ft (576–1025 m).

**PLANT COMMUNITY:** Lower Colorado River Valley and Arizona Upland subdivisions of the Sonoran Desertscrub (Turner and Brown 1981, *in* Levy 1998). Associated plants include: saguaro (*Cereus giganteus*), paloverde (*Cercidium microphyllum*), mesquite, cholla (*Opuntia* sp.), acacia (*Acacia* sp.), burroweed, snakeweed, wolfberry, and triangleleaf bursage (Morrison and Dwyer 2023).

**POPULATION TRENDS:** *Caracara plancus* is common in many areas of the very extensive range (southern U.S. to South America); Despite local variations in the population trend, the species is overall suspected to be stable or increasing due to its preference for open areas and tolerance of converted and disturbed habitats (BirdLife International 2023).

In Arizona, population trends are not well known, since most of its range is limited to the Tohono O’Odham Nation, where surveys have been limited. According to Levy (1998), “the Caracara may be of relatively recent occurrence in Arizona. The early historical writings do not mention sightings on the Tohono O’Odham Reservation. By all accounts, Caracaras were never more numerous than they are now.” According to Levy (1988 *in* Morrison 1996), the population on the Tohono O’Odham Reservation is estimated at 20–25 breeding pairs.

In global terms, the species has a very large range, stretching from Arizona to Argentina. The species is listed as LC (Least Concern) by the IUCN (BirdLife International 2023), and it’s

large range, relatively stable global population trend, and large global population size prevent it from being listed under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

A study published in 2015 indicated that the Sonora-Arizona population of *C. plancus* is expanding northward in Arizona (Jenness 2015). Reasons for this shift in range are unknown, but are thought to be driven by population increase or habitat loss from the south.

## **SPECIES PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION**

Status definitions: <https://bit.ly/hdms-status-definitions>

Heritage Network Conservation Status Rank definitions: <https://bit.ly/hdms-rank-definitions>

### **ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT STATUS:**

#### **STATE STATUS:**

**HERITAGE NETWORK STATUS:** G5  
S2

#### **OTHER STATUS:**

### ***PREVIOUS STATUS***

**STATE STATUS:** Candidate, as *Polyborus plancus* (AZGFD, WSCA 1996 in prep)  
Candidate, as *Polyborus plancus* (AZGFD, TNW 1988)

**MANAGEMENT FACTORS:** In the U.S., declines have been associated with conversion of habitat to agriculture, residential development, and illegal shooting and trapping; increase in roads and traffic has resulted in increased mortality as the birds feed on road kills. Range has expanded in tropical America concurrent with deforestation; invasion of woody species with overgrazing tends to degrade habitat and result in declines (Ellis et al. 1988). In Texas, Dickinson (1995) observed two instances of red imported fire ant predation on caracara hatchlings.

Their known breeding habitat, nest sites, nest materials, and food supply all seem adequate in Arizona. Over-grazing on the Tohono O'odham lands tends to favor this species because it produces an abundant supply of carcasses of starved livestock. (Levy 1998). Poisoning is still a source of mortality, particularly in Arizona, Mexico, and Central and South America, as a consequence of mammalian predator control (Morrison 1996).

### **PROTECTIVE MEASURES TAKEN:**

**SUGGESTED PROJECTS:** Specific research goals include determining nesting habitat, nesting phenology, seasonal food habits and seasonal movements of adults and young. Additionally, several life history traits need further attention, including age-specific survival, particularly

differences between juveniles hatched early or late in the season; recruitment of young; age at first breeding; and age-related reproductive success. Establishment of effective long-term monitoring programs to monitor land management practices and habitat loss.

**LAND MANAGEMENT/OWNERSHIP:** BIA – Tohono O’Odham Nation.

## **SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION**

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#### MAJOR KNOWLEDGEABLE INDIVIDUALS:

#### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

The name Caracara is of South American Indian origin, supposedly representing the sound of the bird's call. None of the calls heard by past observers remotely resembles *cara-cara*. With this in mind, Levy (1998) suggests that the name may in fact, be a derivative of the Spanish word *cara* (face), referring to the Striking reddish orange face.

A common subject of folklore and legends throughout Central and South America, the Crested Caracara is also the national emblem of Mexico, where it is known as the "Mexican eagle" (Morrison 1996).

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