

Anhinga

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Pato Aguja (Spanish)

Anhinga anhinga

Class: Aves
Order: Pelecaniformes
Family: Anhingidae
Genus: Anhinga

Distribution

From North Carolina, the anhinga ranges south through the coastal states, across Central America and well into South America.

Habitat

At lower elevations, the anhinga prefers fresh water, usually still, sheltered waters like lakes, ponds and marsh.

Food

The anhinga is a piscivore.

Reproduction

Breeding is year round in the tropics and seasonal elsewhere. In trees over or near water, anhinga nest colonially with other large water birds, often using old nests.

Development

Born altricial, the young mature quickly. From about day 10, they can drop into the water and swim away if threatened.



In Costa Rica, the anhinga is particularly abundant around the waters of Palo Verde National Park and the Rio Frio/Cano Negro area. West of the Andes, it reaches Ecuador. East of the Andes, it spreads across the Amazon Basin down to northern Argentina and Uruguay. Also found in Cuba.

It requires nearby perches such as logs or low branches to dry its waterlogged feathers after feeding. In Costa Rica, it sometimes haunts brackish waters such as lagoons and mangroves.

Smaller, flatter-sided, slower moving fish make up most of its diet. It also consumes crustaceans (crayfish, shrimp) and aquatic insects. In Costa Rica, it takes caiman hatchlings.

Courtship begins with the male performing wing waves, reverse bowing, and head swaying. To claim a nest site, he deposits twigs and does aerobic soaring. Later he brings sticks and leaves that the female weaves into a bulky platform. After she lays 2 to 6 eggs, the pair shares the brooding for the 25 to 30 days till hatching. When switching places, they often perform recognition displays such as stretching out or entwining their necks as well as vocalizing. Males are aggressive in defending the nest. They spread their wings and snap at intruders.

Hatchlings are fed a pasty fluid of regurgitated fish. Soon they are retrieving whole bits of fish from their parents' mouths. At three weeks, they make tentative forays onto nearby branches, but don't fledge until their sixth week, leaving home a few weeks after that. Anhinga becomes sexually mature at two. Their lifespan is about 12 years.

Characteristics

With its lengthy beak, neck and tail, the anhinga stretches out almost a metre. Its wingspan is about 1.1 metres. Weight is about 1.2 kilos.

Adaptations

Out of water the anhinga has an S-shaped neck. When swimming it stretches its head and neck flat out on the surface with its body submerged. This gives it the appearance of a snake gliding through the water, as a result it also known as the 'snake bird'. A hinge-like modification to its eighth and ninth cervical vertebrae allows it to arch its neck and thrust its pointed bill forward like a spear, stabbing fish in the side. (Hence its other name of darter). On surfacing, it loosens its victim, tosses it up, and catches it head-first so that swallowing is easier. The bill edges are serrated for better gripping.

Status/Threats

IUCN: No Concern
Overall numbers are fairly stable however there are regional concerns.

Sightings at Caño Palma

It is seen along the length of Caño Palma...
Occasionally a nest with babies is seen as well.

References

Sibley, D. The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior. Pgs 65-66. A.A. Knopf Inc. 2001.
http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/accounts/anhinga_anhinga
www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/anhinga/lifehistory
Frederick and Siegel-Causey. 2000. Anhinga. In *The Birds of North America*, No. 522.

Except for the female's pale-brown head, neck and upper chest, the anhinga is glossy black. Wing coverts and long, lance-like scapulars have silvery spots and streaks. The tail with its buffy tip fans out like a turkey's. Bill and legs are yellow. During breeding season, the male acquires a spray of wispy, whitish plumes on its nape, and its facial skin turns turquoise. Juveniles resemble the female though the neck and upper chest are buffier and they lack most silver markings.

Anhinga feathers lack hooklets on the barbules, which increases porosity, leading to quick saturation and reduced buoyancy. As a result the anhinga paddles along with its body below the surface. Only its S-shaped neck remains above-water. To submerge and ascend, it can regulate buoyancy by letting air out of or into the respiratory system's air sacs. This is done by changing the wings' position to open or close the orifices of subpectoral diverticula. Though it has totipalmate feet (four webbed toes), waterlogged feathers restrict its swimming speed so that it's limited to hunting slower fish. Sometimes it waits for fish to come to it. Neutrally buoyant at about three metres, it doesn't try to go much deeper since that expends too much energy. On emerging from the water, it finds a branch where it can spread its wings to the sun to dry off and warm up. Flight is difficult until the feathers are dry. If it attempts to fly while its wings are wet, it has great difficulty getting off the water and takes off by flapping vigorously while "running" on the water. At night, metabolism and body temperature lower so that energy needs are reduced about 10%. Above 25°C, it uses gular fluttering to cool down. Its long wings make it an efficient soarer. While soaring, it holds its wings flat and straight, its neck outstretched or held with a slight kink; its long, straight tail is conspicuous. Anhinga often uses thermals for soaring, and may achieve altitudes of over a thousand metres...

With so many wetlands being drained for recreation, buildings or farms, anhingas are deprived of feeding and nesting locations. Their aquatic lifestyle and diet makes them vulnerable to environmental pollutants, especially contained within the food they consume.

The anhinga is commonly seen drying its wings along the inter-coastal waterways

