

Aramus guarana (Limpkin)

Family: Aramidae (Limpkin)

Order: Gruiformes (Cranes and Rails)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Limpkin, *Aramus guarana*.

[http://tolweb.org/Aramus_guarana/26311, downloaded 13 November 2016]

TRAITS. The limpkin is also known as the crying bird due to the screeching sound it makes (Nature Works, 2016). Both sexes are alike with adults being 58-60cm in length. Limpkins are ibis-like birds with an almost straight beak (Blake, 1977). They are generally dark brown or olive brown, the tail is bronze, and forehead and sides of head are greyish-brown. The long beak is also greyish brown and black at the tip, and there are conspicuous white stripes on the neck, wings and body (Fig. 1). Immature limpkins are similar to the adults but have fewer and thinner white stripes (All About Birds, 2015).

ECOLOGY. Found in swampy forests, mangroves and marshes in tropical zones (Blake, 1977) over a wide geographical range. They occur in countries in the Caribbean and Central and South America, including Argentina, Aruba, Belize, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, Trinidad and Tobago, Paraguay and Venezuela (Fig. 2). Limpkins can also be found in Florida (Nature Works, 2016). *Aramus guarana* feed on *Pomacea* spp. at a rate of approximately 18 snails per day (Macek et al., 2009). These birds select larger prey when there is

a wide range of prey size available but capture smaller prey in the presence of other predators such as the snail kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*), which may be due to foraging risks. Therefore, the structure of the habitat can affect foraging patterns and predator-prey relations (Tanaka et al., 2005).

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION. Adults forage in single species flocks where the advantage of being in large groups may include reduced predation risk, increased foraging efficiency and social learning. It is uncommon for limpkins to nest, roost or forage in mixed species groups (Bennetts and Dreitz, 1997). When part of the limpkin flock flew to a new location, the remainder of the flock followed so that they all end up at the same location. Territories are established by males and females for the purpose of reproduction where territory sizes may vary depending on prey abundance, prey availability and social phenomena. The young will leave their nest within a day of hatching and follow one or both parents which will feed it.

ACTIVITY. *Aramus guarana* feed at night, especially on moonlit nights. The adults feed on snails in patches and repeatedly consume prey from these patches (Macek et al., 2009). Their foraging also varies with season, prey abundance and climatic factors. They display semi-nomadic behaviour, and fly with a quick upstroke and slow downstroke, giving a crane-like appearance during flight. Limpkins may move around during wet and dry seasons. They have no mating season, reproducing throughout the year, but may abandon breeding sites in the event that there is scarcity of food or human disturbance.

FORAGING BEHAVIOUR. They feed mainly on snails of the genus *Pomacea*, a behaviour shared with the snail kite, *Rostrhamus sociabilis* (Conti et al., 2011). However, they may also feed on mussels, seeds, small reptiles and frogs, or insects. They catch snails in floating mats of water hyacinth, which are larger than free-floating snails. They prey on those snails occurring in their habitat (Estela and Naranjo, 2005). As a result, their distribution is linked to snail distribution. They forage by walking in shallow water, looking or probing the mud or vegetation. They capture snails with their bills and move it to an area where it pecks at it with its beak to get the meat from inside the shell. Limpkins show aggressive behaviour at times with low snail density. *Aramus guarana* experience kleptoparasitism by snail kites. This is the occurrence of a snail kite perching and observing the limpkin. It waits for the limpkin to pick up a snail and it swoops in from behind, stealing the limpkin's meal. This occurrence is only common when there is a shortage of food.

COMMUNICATION. Limpkins have a piercing and screeching wail. The adult males exhibit what may be threat displays by engaging in aggressive, ritualistic confrontations including charging, retreating and loud calling which is often heard at night or dawn. These confrontations may be a way of the male protecting its territory. Males have a distinctively different call from the females.

REPRODUCTIVE BEHAVIOUR. Limpkins are monogamous, breeding successfully within their first year, but may change partners. Males and females establish territories for the purpose of reproduction, and territorial males tend to engage in aggressive, ritualistic confrontations. Nesting sites vary from the ground near water, marsh grass just above water, shrubs or trees above water or even at heights up to about several metres. These nests are made of reeds, grasses and lined with thinner plant material. Females may lay 4-8 eggs with blotches or grey or brown

on them. Incubation of eggs can be done by both sexes, however, the incubation time is not known. They can breed all year round with no specific mating season.

JUVENILE BEHAVIOUR. Chicks are precocial: they are hatched in an advanced state and are able to feed themselves immediately. They leave their nest and forage for food as soon as they are born, following one or both parents. Hatchlings have long, thick, soft down. Juveniles are similar in colour to the adults, with smaller white streaks, and their legs and feet are a dull olive-black colour. They have large eyes with dull yellow eyelid. There is a noticeable lengthening of the leg about the third week and they begin to fly soon after. Juvenile limpkins mature quickly, able to fly in about seven weeks.

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Fig. 2. Limpkin geographic distribution.

[<http://maps.iucnredlist.org/map.html?id=22692174>, downloaded 13 November 2016]

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