

ASSESSING THE VERTEBRATE COMPONENT OF THE DIET
OF FLORIDA'S CRESTED CARACARAS (*CARACARA CHERIWAY*)

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ABSTRACT: We studied the vertebrate component of the breeding season diet of the Northern crested caracara (*Caracara cheriway*) in south-central Florida, where this species occurs as an isolated population and is threatened by widespread habitat loss. From 75 prey remain samples collected at active nests in 40 different breeding areas during February – June 1994-1997, we identified 299 prey items representing 53 different prey types from 5 vertebrate classes and 37 families. Mammals comprised the largest proportion of all prey items (31.4%) followed by reptiles (24.1%), fish (23.7%), birds (13.4%), and amphibians (7.4%), and many of these items were probably taken alive. One hundred ninety-two prey items (64.2%, 17 different families) represented species that use wetlands during all or part of their life history, suggesting dependence of this raptor on wetlands for foraging, at least during the breeding season. Carrion comprised approximately 33% of the diet of nesting caracaras in Florida. Our results differ from those reported for the diet of crested caracaras in Mexico, Argentina, and Andean Patagonia possibly due to differences in habitat types and diversity, land use, and carrion availability.