

Crested Caracara

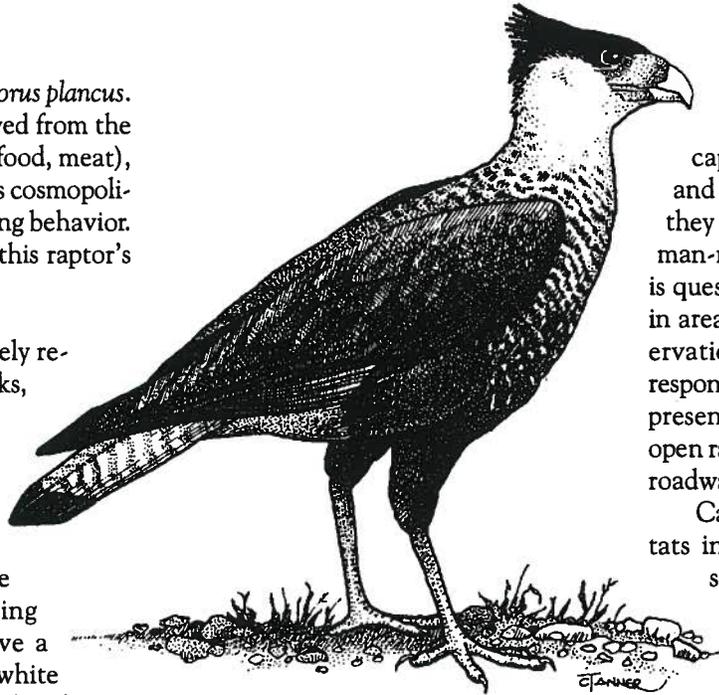
By Richard L. Glinski
Nongame Section Supervisor

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Polyborus plancus*. The genus *Polyborus* is derived from the Greek (*poly* = many, *bor* = food, meat), in reference to the caracara's cosmopolitan diet and voracious feeding behavior. The Latin *plancus* refers to this raptor's flat-footed gait.

DESCRIPTION: More closely related to falcons than to hawks, the crested caracara scarcely resembles either in form or behavior. Its long legs reveal ground-dwelling habits, and the reddish, naked area on the face bespeaks carrion-eating tendencies. Both sexes have a blackish body, distinctive white wing patches, white and black tail bars, and a white head topped with a black crest. Juveniles resemble adults at a distance, but up close are buffy and brown-streaked on the breast. This species is fairly large, measuring about two feet long, with a wingspan of four feet. Although not extremely vocal, caracaras may, if irritated, emit a gargled clacking sound that is accompanied by erect posture and head-tosses.

HABITAT: In Arizona, caracaras occur most commonly in Sonoran desertscrub and mesquite grasslands. They do not require pristine habitats, and humans often enhance conditions for caracaras by providing them with carrion. Caracaras are commonly found along roadways, where they can take advantage of road-killed animals, or at rural garbage dumps, in pursuit of scraps. Recently, more sanitary disposal of dead livestock at feedlots in Arizona has eliminated much of this "habitat."

DISTRIBUTION: Caracaras occur from the southern United States through the



southern tip of South America. The Tohono O'odham Reservation, in southern Arizona, is the only reliable place to see this raptor in the United States west of the continental divide. Scattered reports of mainly nonbreeding individuals in Arizona range as far north as Phoenix, and as far east as New Mexico. Caracaras also occur (and breed) in south Texas and Florida.

BIOLOGY: Caracaras are permanent but very local residents of the lush Sonoran Desert of south-central Arizona. They typically build nests in saguaro arms. Two brown-speckled eggs are laid in May. The young leave the nest in July to join their parents in feeding on road-killed animals along highways near nests. Much of their scavenged food is rabbits or small rodents, but they take almost any carrion, even livestock.

Caracaras are frequently seen on the ground. Their flat-footedness allows them to be quite nimble at running after live prey, as well as at hopping around

a carcass. The ultimate opportunists, caracaras can also capture such prey as small rodents and horned lizards. Whether or not they now obtain most food from human-related sources, such as road-kills, is questionable. It seems, however, that in areas like the Tohono O'odham Reservation the caracara population has responded favorably over the years to the presence of livestock carcasses on the open range, and animal mortalities along roadways.

Caracaras occur in a variety of habitats in South America, including the southern end of the continent, where the latitude and climate are the equivalent of those of Juneau, Alaska. Given their ecological flexibility and ability to adapt to human presence, one wonders why they do not occur farther north than southern Arizona.

STATUS: Although included on the Department's 1988 list of *Threatened Native Wildlife in Arizona* as a "candidate" species, because of its small and local population here, the crested caracara does not have any special federal status. It is one raptor that seems to be doing well in the presence of human settlement, and in many ways humans benefit this bird.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Since the core population of caracaras is along the Mexico-United States border, actions that may accompany the North American Free Trade Agreement with Mexico should be managed to protect important caracara breeding areas. Presently, though, the only immediate need is to create and implement a systematic and low intensity method of keeping a non-intrusive finger on the population pulse of this intriguing raptor. 🦅