

**SPECIES OF THE MONTH****CRESTED CARACARA****JANUARY 2025**

The Crested Caracara (*Caracara plancus*) is a member of the *Falconidae* family, which unlike other species of this tribe is adapted to foraging on the ground and eating carrion. The northern subspecies (*C. p. cheriway*) is found in the southern United States, parts of Mexico and Central America, northern South America, and Cuba. The southern subspecies (*C. p. plancus*) is in eastern and southern South America. In the United States, breeding populations are found in Arizona, Texas, Louisiana, and Florida. Arizona caracaras are part of a broader population that extends far south in western Mexico. In Arizona, its breeding range appears to have expanded in recent years, and it nests west to Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, east to the Santa Cruz River, and north to the Florence area.

Crested Caracaras are nonmigratory, but in Arizona they will fly hundreds of miles within their Arizona-Mexico breeding range to find food that is seasonally available. They often feed in large groups and may spend nights at communal roosts on saguaro cactus (*Carnegiea gigantea*). Nesting adults feed young by scavenging animal carcasses, as well as catching small rodents, rabbits, birds, and reptiles. When not breeding, much of the diet consists of invertebrates, such as beetles, crickets, and grubs. Caracaras typically reach breeding age in 3 years. Unlike other falcons, which do not build nests, caracaras construct large nests with thin plant fibers and twigs. In Arizona, the nests are mostly in saguaros. Usually, they raise 1 to 3 chicks, the number depending on available food. Pairs in Arizona and other locations have been known to raise more than 1 brood in a year, if food resources are ample.

Adult Crested Caracaras are similar in size to Red-tailed Hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*) but have longer necks and legs. They have a bright orange-red face, bluish bill, yellow legs, and black crown feathers that, when raised, can appear as a crest. The face, neck, and throat are white, the rest of body is black except for the rump and uppertail coverts, which are white. A large white patch at the base of outer primaries is conspicuous in flight. Juveniles progress through different plumages that are brown rather than black and have blue-gray legs.



Adult Crested Caracara, Santa Cruz Flats, Pinal County, 2 November 2024. Photo by Muriel Neddermeyer