



The Mexican Eagle in Texas



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Excerpt



Figure (1)

Caracara (Mexican Eagle) *Polyborus Cheriway* (old name)

This handsome bird is the national emblem of our neighbor, the Republic of Mexico, and appears on its seal with a rattlesnake in its mouth [1].

Keywords: Caracara; *Polyborus Cheriway*; Mexican Eagle; Quebrantahuesos; Golden Eagle

History

While an interesting bit of historical text, there is a conflicting story that one would guess created this misconception that the Mexican Eagle is a Crested Caracara (*Caracara Cheriway*). Many references today continue to state that the eagle is a Crested Caracara. According to legend, the Aztecs, then a nomadic tribe, were wandering throughout Mexico in search of a divine sign that would indicate the precise spot upon which they were to build their capital. Their god had told them to find a lake where an eagle with a snake in its beak would stand on a nopal cactus growing from a rock. That would be the place to build their new city.

The coat of arms of Mexico depicts an eagle perched on a prickly pear cactus devouring a rattlesnake. The image relates to the story of the founding of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital. The symbol originated in pre-Hispanic times yet experienced many changes throughout history. It By 1823 however, it was declared a unique national symbol by a Constitutional Congress, and the design was based on an 1821 decree (see Article 2, below) that specified the symbol had to be an eagle. This eagle was replaced with many other symbols later, until the National crest was chosen. The last decree that specifies the design of the Mexican flag was

promulgated in 1983 by Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado, President of Mexico at that time. In 1960, the Mexican ornithologist Martín del Campo identified the eagle in pre-Hispanic manuscripts as a crested caracara or “quebrantahuesos” (bone-breaker), a species common in Mexico (although the name “eagle” is taxonomically

incorrect, as the caracara is a type of falcon) [2].

Below, by Alex Covarrubias based on the arms by Juan Gabino.
- Own work based on: Mexico coat of arms.png, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2638888>



Figure 2:

Today, the bird featured on the Mexican coat of arms is the Golden Eagle. This bird is known in Spanish as águila real (literally, “royal eagle”). The Golden Eagle is considered the Mexican eagle for official purposes, and for the same reason is considered the official bird of Mexico. The eagle standing on the nopal is the essential part of the Mexican national symbol and symbolizes a free nation, because it represents the sun, the strength, the audacity, and the cunning. The nopal is a prickly cactus species (*Opuntia*) that grows in those areas and its fruits (a few red tunas) represent the hearts of the defeated warriors. For its part, the encino (oak) symbolizes strength and laurel symbolizing victory and honor underneath [3].

Article 2

“The National Shield is made up of a Mexican eagle, with the left profile exposed, the upper part of the wings on a level higher than the plume and slightly deployed in combat attitude; With the plumage of support downwards touching the tail and the feathers of this one in natural fan. Posed its left claw on a blossomed nopal (prickly pear cactus) that is born in a rock that emerges of a lake, fastens with the right and with the beak, in attitude to devour, to a curved serpent, so that it harmonizes with the set. Several cactus stalks branch at the sides. Two branches, one of encino (oak) to the front of the eagle and another of laurel to the opposite side, form between them a semicircle inferior and are united by means

of a strip divided in three strips that, when the National Coat of Arms is represented in natural colors, correspond to Those of the National Flag.”

Law on the National Coat of Arms, Flag and Anthem of the United Mexican States (1984) [4].

The Crested Caracara

The Crested Caracara (*Caracara cheriway*) is related to the typical falcons, but very different in shape and habits. An adult is about 24 inches with a large head, conspicuous orange skin around the bill, and white throat and neck. This species is a strikingly patterned, broad-winged opportunist that often feeds on carrion.

Aggressive and called the King of Vultures, it may chase vultures away from road kills and favorite perches Like this Caracara displacing the Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*). Widespread in the American tropics, it enters Texas at the Mexican border. “Caracara” comes from a South American Indian name, based on the bird’s call. Caracaras are opportunists, hunting and scavenging in a variety of ways. They often hunt by flying low, taking small animals by surprise. It flies along highways early in morning, searching for road kills. It may frequently steal food from other birds, especially Black and Turkey Vultures. Most frequently, a caracara will fly in, land, and walk up to its prey [5].



Figure 3: The Crested Caracara (*Caracara cheriway*) pair, fight for dominant position above a Prickly Pear Cactus (*Opuntia engelmannii*), the state plant of Texas.



Figure 4:



Figure 5: In flight, the Crested caracara looks like a small bald eagle. Outstanding markings include a black-capped white head and neck, and white tail tipped with black. The wing-tip primaries appear light gray to white. The bill is bright gray and sere orange and with yellow feet and legs.

Range

The Caracara is found in prairies and rangeland. It lives in a wide variety of semi-open habitats offering open ground for hunting and dense cover for nesting. In the United States these include wet prairies of Florida, Texas coastal plain and deserts in Arizona. Found in other kinds of open terrain in American tropics. The historical and typical range of the caracara in Texas used to extend northward barely to San Antonio. When living in San Antonio in 1980, I would rarely see one as far north as the old sewage disposal site, south of the city [6].

Within the past few decades, the range has expanded northward beyond Houston and into south central Louisiana. The species has also expanded into the Hill country and north of Waco and to the Dallas-Fort Worth region. I have recently seen Caracaras as far north as Wichita Falls, Texas. Documented reports of the species occur in almost all central and eastern contiguous counties of Texas from the Rio Grande River to the Red River. Additional reports of caracaras in central Oklahoma and northwest Arkansas are now documented in iNaturalist and eBird [7].

Several theories support this range expansion, including climate changes, habitat destruction and population expansion in the northern reaches of Mexico and Southern Texas. The Audubon Society predicts that if the average temperature rises by only five degrees Fahrenheit, the caracara's winter range will eventually consume all of Texas other than perhaps, the Panhandle [8].

Agrarian reform in northern Mexico, since the 1930's under President Lazaro Cardenas and the 1040's under President Manuel Avila Camacho has been a major factor in the removal of the low brush and scrub lands favored by the caracara. This has been especially evident in the State of Tamaulipas comprising an area of more than 30-thousand square miles. Today, Tamaulipas has more area of irrigated croplands than any other Mexican state. Subsequently, in the 1950's-70's the Green Revolution developed new, viable strains of grains and other crops that resulted in agricultural exports that were called "truly spectacular". Until the late 1990's Mexico was a net exporter of agricultural products [9].

After the Green Revolution came the age of the maquiladoras (export-oriented assembly plants) intensified by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. This age of free trade created a period of significant industrial expansion in Mexican cities like Matamoros, Nuevo Laredo, and Reynosa. This cross-border trade boom brought immigration to the areas and population expansion that facilitated increased urban sprawl. Caracaras prefer to live in a mix of grasslands and trees for perching. With Texas's previously open grasslands turning into brush country because of overgrazing, the birds have now found a more suitable habitat. This year, I drive weekly from Austin through central Texas to the scrublands around Kingsville, 250 miles to the south. As a rule, I will regularly see as many as ten caracaras feeding on roadkill or perched along the highways [10-13].

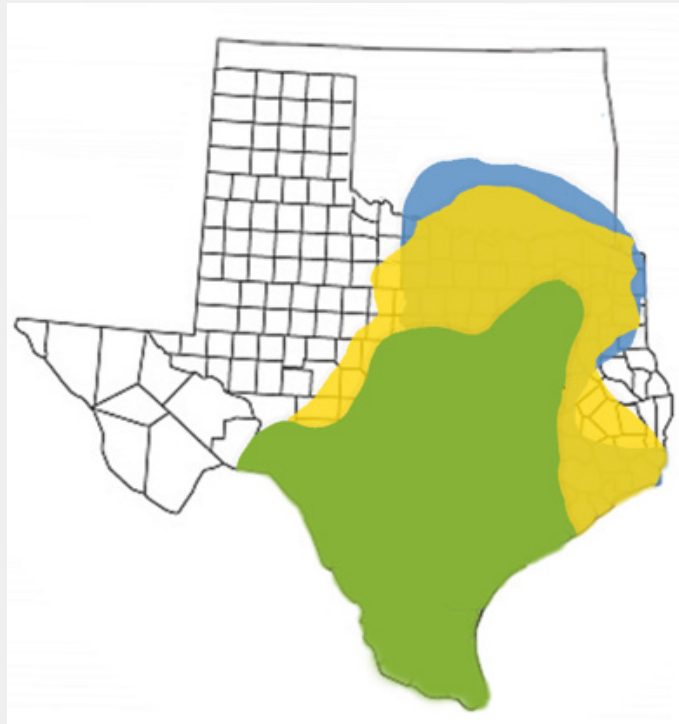


Figure 6: Range of the Crested Caracara historical and current. The green area represents the range based on National Geographic Birds of North America, 6th edition. 2016; yellow, eBird online 2021; and blue, naturalist online 2021.



Figure 7: When Caracaras feed, they do with great excess, expanding their crop until it protrudes from their breast feathers. After gorging I have seen them fly away to a secluded spot, regurgitate their food for consumption later and come back for seconds.

Brian Loflin is a photographer, author, and teacher with a passion for natural science. Trained as a biologist, he has an inborn curiosity about what things look at high magnifications. Four

decades experience shooting advertising, commercial, and medical images led him to teach a curriculum in Wildlife Photography at the Texas A&M University-Kingsville. He has travelled extensively

around the world, but now Brian enjoys leading a camera club and a few photographic workshops, and kicking back to Austin, Texas with his wife, Shirley, and their cat.

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