

WHITE-FACED IBIS SIGHTING IN ESSEX, MASSACHUSETTS

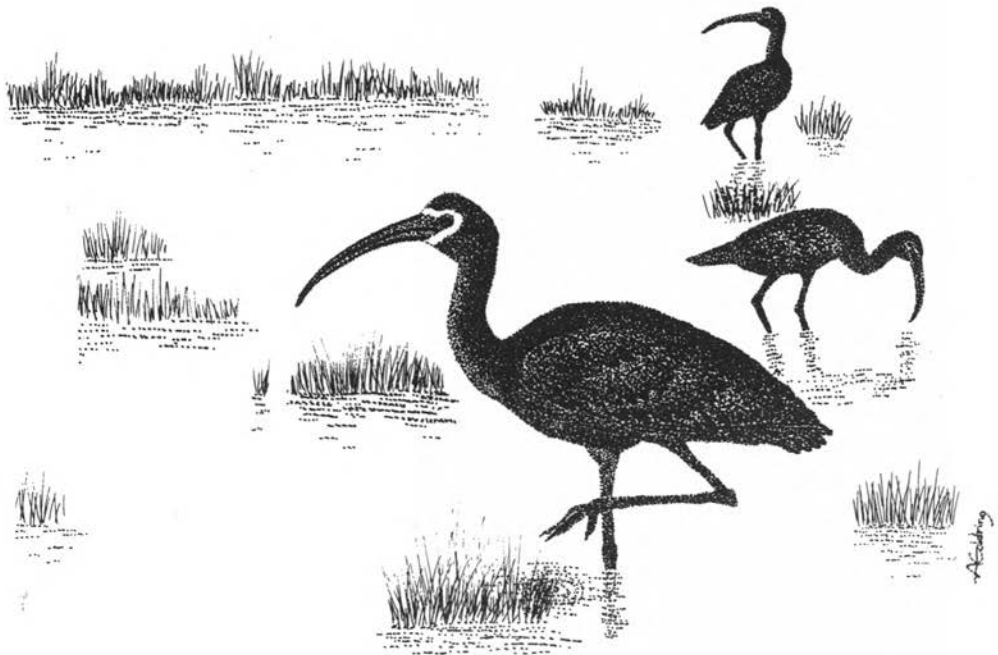
by Richard A. Forster, Framingham

The identification of White-faced Ibis (Plegadis chihi) is not so subtle as to require a detailed description of field marks. Rather, I shall relate a narrative of the circumstances leading to the discovery and identification of the ibis.

The date was April 24, 1984, and was a typical April day, being heavily overcast with intermittent light showers. It was cool but without the penetrating rawness often associated with such April weather due to fairly moderate winds. I had just visited Island Road in Essex and turned left on Route 133 to head toward Cape Ann. Shortly on the right (west) side of the road was a flooded farm field. I saw a small flock of largish, dark birds feeding in the grass along the edge of the water that I at first took to be American Black Ducks but quickly recognized were Glossy Ibis (Plegadis falcinellus). I stopped the car for closer inspection because these were the first ibis I had seen this year, and I consider Glossy Ibis one of the more interesting of the heron group. As I was watching the ten ibis from the car with my binoculars, I noticed one with seemingly more white about the face. I thought to myself, "Well, it can't be, but I'll look anyway." I got the telescope out of the trunk and focused on the ibis that were about a hundred yards distant. The bird in question was obvious through the telescope and showed about a quarter-inch crescent-shaped band of white extending from the top of the bill around the eye and ending at the base of the bill. This alone was enough to clinch the identification in my mind, because the accompanying Glossy Ibis had barely discernible, incomplete bluish-white lines in the same general area. I next checked the leg color which was reddish at the "knee" joint and about an inch or so above and below the joint. Otherwise the legs were dusky.

The clincher, although at this point in my mind I didn't need confirmation, was the iris color. My attention to this detail was prompted by a comment that Tom Davis of New York City made during a phone conversation in the spring of 1983. He called me one day and said that "old red-eye is back." I pleaded innocence and queried what he meant and found that White-faced Ibis have a brilliant ruby-red iris. This last field mark I checked carefully and, indeed, a brilliant ruby or scarlet iris was evident, whereas the iris color of the Glossys was dark in all individuals. This combination of characters served to establish the identification of White-faced Ibis.

White-faced Ibis wander considerably, and vagrants are recorded north to western Canada and in the eastern United States to Ohio, Maryland, and Long Island, New York. In fact, two individuals have been present at Jamaica Bay National Wildlife Refuge on Long Island, and the possibility of breeding is suspected. In light of these recent developments, more records of White-faced Ibis can be expected in the future.



White-faced with Glossy Ibis in Essex Field

Illustration by Anne Goldring

RICHARD A. FORSTER started at an early age on a direct route to a career in natural history, from a boyhood enthusiasm for turtles and salamanders to his first rare bird at age 12 - an Arctic Three-toed Woodpecker - to a biology major at Boston University, birding all the way, and finally to a position in the Natural History Services at MAS as an acknowledged expert on New England birds, noted for his gifted eyes and ears and phenomenal memory. As a tour leader for MAS, his field experience has expanded to 4 continents - 5, counting Asia where he saw 111 species during army service in Vietnam. In addition to running the Tern Management Program, teaching, lecturing, editing "the voice," and consulting, he is chairman of the state Records Committee and a regional editor for American Birds, has authored many articles, and is currently preparing for publication in 1985, the state Breeding Bird Atlas and The Birds of Massachusetts, co-authored with R. Veit.

ANNE GOLDRING, the current Voice of Audubon, who drew the White-faced Ibis picture that appears in this issue, has had no formal art training and only recently discovered her talent for drawing. Joining the Natural History Services at MAS (where she plays multiple roles as receptionist, dispenser of information about natural history phenomena, curator of the photographic slide library, and "the voice") has expanded her interest in education and the environmental field to include birding, camping and hiking, and now - art.



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