

MORE ON GLOSSY IBISES

by Andrew H. Williams

Robert C. Humphrey's paper, "Range Expansion and New Breeding Record for the Glossy Ibis in Massachusetts" (*Bird Observer*, August 1987, 15: 173) admirably describes the nest and nest site of a Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*) pair on Monomoy in 1986. Unfortunately, Humphrey perpetuates Audubon's mistaken view regarding the history of the arrival and spread of the Glossy Ibis in the New World. Also, I think his statement characterizing the species as nesting above ground is misleading. In a study of the literature about the relationship between the Glossy Ibis and the White-faced Ibis (*P. chihi*), I have amassed an extensive bibliography that supports the following view of the arrival and spread of the Glossy Ibis in the New World.

It seems that the Glossy Ibis colonized the New World by crossing the North Atlantic just prior to 1800, making its landfall in the Caribbean and successfully establishing itself there, perhaps first on the western end of the island of Hispaniola. Then it spread, slowly at first and then explosively, through coastal North America by colonizing Cuba and peninsular Florida and then spreading west along the Gulf Coast and north along the Atlantic Coast as far as southern Maine. It lives throughout peninsular Florida, but elsewhere in North America, it almost always occurs in coastal habitats. The species spread, too, through the West Indies and recently has been reported from Trinidad, Colombia, and Venezuela along the north coast of South America.

Based on records of occurrence and observed population levels and present-day migration patterns, the circumstantial evidence for this colonization scenario is simply overwhelming. In fact, I can find no other published explanation or interpretation of the Glossy's appearance in the New World. [Editor's note: The author supplied *Bird Observer* with fifty-eight references in the literature to support this statement. Readers who are interested should contact the author for this list.]

At least as late as 1893, the Glossy Ibis bred at Guadalquivir in Spain (Anon. 1905), and Palmer (1962) indicates this species used to breed in Morocco. It is my bet that the founding population in the Caribbean came from Spain or Morocco. This idea is not my own. Richard Forster suggested this to me upon his return from a trip to the Caribbean where he believed he had just seen a Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*). Little Egrets and Western Reef Herons (*E. gularis*) have found their way to the Caribbean from the Old World several times (Norton 1985). And I believe the Glossy Ibis may have successfully colonized the New World once before. Fossils of a *Plegadis* ibis have been found at Rancho La Brea in California and have been dated at more than 10,000

years BP (Wetmore 1956). These fossils are identified as the White-faced Ibis, which lives in California today, but these could just as well be Glossy Ibis remains. The descendants of these earlier colonists are the closely related (if not, conspecific) White-faced Ibis, with its two separate populations in North and South America.

Humphrey repeats Audubon's error that in 1837, the Glossy Ibis existed "in vast numbers in Mexico and in flocks, but only as a summer resident, in Texas." No doubt, the ibises of Mexico and Texas were White-faced Ibises (Edwards 1972, Oberholser 1974, Palmer 1962, Peterson and Chalif 1973, and Pratt 1976). This error of Audubon's casts doubt on the true identity of the ibis shot in Maryland in 1817, which Audubon referred to as a Glossy and the "first intimation" of this species in the United States. Further along in Humphrey's paper is the sentence, "The breeding range in this country was restricted to Texas and Florida for most of the first half of the 1900s." Presumably Humphrey based this statement on Audubon's information. Oberholser (1974) lists this species as hypothetical in Texas.

I differ, too, with Humphrey's statement, "Like most waders, ibises traditionally build elevated nests in trees and bushes." This is misleading. My search of the literature revealed the diversity of situations and building materials utilized by the Glossy and White-faced ibises in their nesting. Many sources document nesting on the ground among herbaceous marshy growth (*Scirpus*, *Typha*, *Phragmites*) or among dryland forbs, in bushes, in trees, and in tangled vine-covered thickets. Nests are at ground level or low in the supporting growth. In some instances, nests are built that float on water or that sit on the ground. Some nests are built over water. Both Glossy and White-faced ibises frequently share a colony with several, sometimes many, other nesting birds -- herons, egrets, cormorants, gulls, White Ibises (*Eudocimus albus*), Roseate Spoonbills (*Ajaia ajaja*), and Wood Storks (*Mycteria americana*). Glossy Ibises show greater flexibility in nesting requirements (both globally and within the New World) than do White-faced Ibises, which most often nest in marshes rather than in woody vegetation. In most areas -- in desert or steppe habitats -- where the White-faced Ibis nests, there are few trees. And so they nest in marshy herbaceous vegetation. In the Old World, in similar steppe habitats, the Glossy Ibis, too, nests in marshy herbaceous vegetation (Bond 1936 and 1971, Brewster 1886, Bull 1974, Burger 1978a, 1978b, 1979, Burger and Müller 1977, Flint et al. 1984, Forbush and May 1939, Hundertmark 1974, Ivey and Severson 1984, Ogden 1978, Palmer 1962, Pearson 1936, Ryder 1967).

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