

Status of the Glossy Ibis in Mexico

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THIS PAPER DETAILS THE FIRST records of the Glossy Ibis for Mexico and summarizes the status of *Plegadis* ibises in Middle America.

The Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*) is a notoriously nomadic wading bird widespread in Eurasia, Africa, and Australasia (Cramp and Simmons 1977). In addition, it breeds commonly and is increasing in the eastern United States, to which it may have spread from the Old World in the mid- to late 1800s (Palmer 1962). In the New World it also occurs locally in the Greater Antilles, Central America and northern Venezuela (A.O.U. 1983), a distribution in accord with what one might expect from a transAtlantic invader; *c.f.* the early stages of the more spectacular and well-documented spread of the Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) (Crosby 1972).

The very similar White-faced Ibis (*P. chihi*) breeds commonly in the western United States, northern Mexico (see Fig. 1), and locally in South America (A.O.U. 1983). In North America it winters south on the Atlantic slope to eastern Mexico and on the Pacific slope to Guatemala, El Salvador, and possibly Costa Rica (at least formerly). However, vagrant occurrences are documented from as far afield as Hawaii, British Columbia, and Massachusetts (DeSante and Pyle 1986) and thus demonstrate a considerable potential for wandering.

Records of Glossy Ibis in Mexico

On November 30, 1985, while leading a Golden Gate Audubon Society tour, Howell found a lone *Plegadis* feeding in roadside fresh water

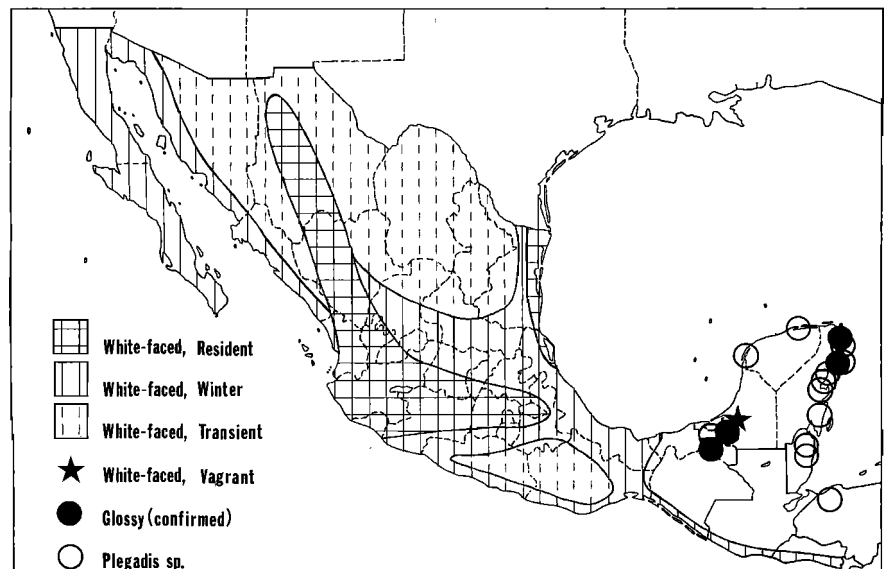
marshes near Emiliano Zapata, in northern Chiapas. The bird was studied for 20 minutes by the group, most of whom were very familiar with White-faced Ibis. The bird was at times within 70 meters and observed through several telescopes in good light. It was an adult, as judged by areas of retained purplish-chestnut feathering on the upperparts; other plumage features, including the white-streaked head and neck, indicated that the bird was essentially in basic plumage. The irises were clearly brown; the unfeathered lores appeared slate-gray and were bordered both above and below by a thin but distinct whitish line, the upper line broader and more striking. The bill and legs appeared grayish. Having had consider-

able experience with both species before and after the sighting, Howell is certain that the red irises of a White-faced Ibis would have been apparent given the views obtained and that the whitish-bordered loreal skin is characteristic of the Glossy Ibis.

The flood plain and marshes of the Usumacinta River where the sighting occurred are at the point where either *Plegadis* might be expected to occur from time to time. We know of several sightings of *Plegadis* sp. from the Usumacinta marshes since the early 1970s including a report of 54 "dark ibis" in July 1972 (Sprunt and Knoder 1980), suggestive of a breeding colony. (See below).

De Montes observed five *Plegadis* ibises at Isla Cancun, Quintana Roo,

Figure 1. Distribution of *Plegadis* ibises in Mexico and northern Central America.



on January 30, 1986. They were feeding in mangroves with other wading birds including White Ibises (*Eudocimus albus*), Tricolored Herons (*Egretta tricolor*) and Snowy Egrets (*E. thula*). Six birds were noted on February 2 and March 28 at the same location and a single bird was still present on April 10, 1986. Photographs taken of the birds (Fig. 2) clearly show the whitish-bordered lores characteristic of the Glossy Ibis.

The third record of Glossy Ibis is a small flock seen along the road to Palizada in the Usumacinta marshes, Campeche, in February 1988 (R. A. Behrstock and K. J. Zimmer, independently). At the time of observation, not all ibises were specifically identified but the observers' notes plus photographs (Fig. 3) indicate that of about 20 *Plegadis* ibises, most were Glossy but at least three White-faced Ibises were also present.

The fourth record of the Glossy Ibis is of a basic-plumaged bird found on Isla Cozumel, Quintana Roo, on June 4, 1988 by Andres M. Sada. The brown irises and contrasting bluish-white line along the upper lores were seen clearly at close range. Howell and Sophie Webb relocated the bird, July 12, 1988, and agreed with the identification.

Following the above scattering of records Howell and S. Webb were amazed to encounter 500-700 *Plegadis* ibises along Route 186 in southwestern Campeche, July 18-20, 1988. At Kilometer post 172 flocks totalling 300-350 birds were present in flooded fields near the highway; about 50% were alternate-plumaged adults and 50% juveniles, many with bills not fully grown. All adults seen at close range (minimum nine to ten birds) were Glossy Ibises: the brown irises and dark blue facial skin with contrasting bluish-white borders were quite obvious. At least one-two juveniles showed traces of whitish lore borders, indicating they were also Glossy. At Kilometer post 164 up to 375 *Plegadis* ibises were seen with 35% adults and 65% juveniles. All of 45 adults seen well were Glossy Ibises as were at least three-four juveniles. Most if not all juveniles at Kilometer 164 appeared to have fully grown bills and a few had traces of white streaking about the head. No immature (year-old) Glossies were identified but at least one immature White-faced Ibis



Figure 2. Glossy Ibis at Cancún, Mexico, February 1986. Photograph/Barbara M. de Montes.

was seen at Kilometer 172. The bright red irises and plain gray lores of the White-faced were striking in contrast to the Glossies. In addition, groups up to four-five *Plegadis* were scattered in flooded fields from Kilometer 173 to Kilometer 156 (Palizada junction) but none was found along the road to Balancan in adjacent Tabasco where similar conditions prevailed. The relatively localized concentrations and high percentage of juveniles indicate that a breeding colony of Glossy Ibises exists close to the sites of our observations. It is also not inconceivable that more of the birds were White-faced Ibises and that both species might be breeding in the area.

The fact that few birders visit southern Mexico in summer helps explain the seemingly dramatic discovery; later in the year, birds presumably disperse more widely although a few may be encountered close to the highway.

As well as the confirmed records detailed above, and earlier reports of *Plegadis* sp. from the Usumacinta Marshes, there are several records of unidentified *Plegadis* ibises in the Yucatán Peninsula (Fig. 1):

June 1976: 1 in roadside marsh at Tulum, Quintana Roo (Hector Ceballos-Lascurain).

October 1977: one in mangroves at Celestun, Yucatán (de Montes).

May 1982: two in freshwater marsh north of Vigia Chico, Quintana Roo (Arturo Lopez Ornat).

June 1983: one, possibly two, in freshwater marsh near Vigia Chico, Quintana Roo (Ingrid Olmstead).

February 1984: one at a brackish lagoon on Isla Cozumel, Quintana Roo (Howell and Peter Pyle).

March 1986: three in freshwater marshes near Majahual, Quintana Roo (Arturo Lopez Ornat).

January 1987: one at small freshwater pool on Cancún Golf Course, Quintana Roo (*per.* Howell).

July 1988: one at Rio Lagartos, Yucatán (Howell and S. Webb).

Status of Glossy Ibis in Middle America

Russell (1964) mentioned no records of *Plegadis* ibises for Belize (British Honduras) but, by 1985, the Glossy Ibis was considered a rare permanent resident in the northern half of that country (Wood *et al.*, 1986). However, the identification of birds as Glossy Ibis is by presumption only and breeding has never been proven in Belize (D. Scott Wood and Dora Weyer *pers. comm.*).

Monroe (1968) reported a single *Plegadis* ibis seen in the lower Sula Valley of northwestern Honduras, on November 29, 1953. In December it was joined by "a few others" which all remained until February 1954. A "white feathered area on the sides of the face" was noted and hence at least one bird was suspected to have been a White-faced Ibis. However, given the time of year, it seems likely that the white observed was the bare lore border and that the birds were, in fact, Glossy Ibises.

We are aware of no confirmed or possible records of the Glossy Ibis from Guatemala, El Salvador, or Nicaragua. There are several reports of *Plegadis* sp., including specifically identified Glossies, in northwest Costa Rica (A.O.U. 1983, Howell *pers. obs.*) and there are several records of *Plegadis* sp., including one specimen reported as a Glossy, in Panama (D. Engelman *pers. comm.*; J. Guarnaccia *pers. comm.*; Ridgely 1981). Records from Costa Rica and Panama are mainly in the northern winter months but there are also records during the northern summer.

A Note on Field Identification

Criteria for distinguishing between the Glossy and White-faced ibises are



Figure 3. Mixed flock, including White-faced Ibises (top and right hand flying birds), Glossy Ibises (standing birds), White Ibises, Great and Snowy egrets along road to Palizada. Photograph/Robert A. Behrstock.

discussed below. The reader is also referred to Pratt (1976).

Separating the Glossy Ibis from the extremely similar White-faced Ibis in the field is difficult, and perhaps impossible in some cases. The plumages of the two species are essentially identical for most of the year, the feathered white "face" of the latter species being apparent only in adults during the breeding season. Migrant White-faced Ibises in Mexico often show no trace of white facial feathering as late as April and May (Howell *pers. obs.*) and care has to be taken distinguishing white feathering from whitish facial skin. For most of the year, only close and careful observation of the coloration of soft parts may give a clue as to the identity of a vagrant ibis.

The iris color of an adult White-faced is bright red, perhaps duller in winter, that of an adult Glossy dark brown. Immatures of both species have gray-brown irises although at least some immature White-faced attain red irises by their first winter. *Note:* Very good and clear views are required to see the true iris color; red irises can often look simply dark unless seen at the right angle.

The unfeathered lores, bill, and legs and feet of both species are dark grayish or pinkish-gray for most of the year. In breeding condition (at least at the onset of the breeding season) the lores of the White-faced flush bright red while those of a Glossy flush cobalt blue and show a bright whitish-blue margin above and below. The whitish lore borders are kept throughout the year by many adult Glossies and some immatures show a clear indication of the paler borders by as early as August (Howell *pers. obs.*). The lores of basic plumage and immature White-faced appear uniform

dark gray, at least from fall into mid-winter. However, adult White-faced can show distinctly reddish lores by early January (Howell *pers. obs.*), when the lore borders may appear distinctly paler, almost reminiscent of the Glossy. However, the pale bordering is washed pinkish and much less distinct than on the Glossy — an observer able to see the pale borders should easily be able to see the reddish lores and bright red irises.

Summary

The above observations indicate that the Glossy Ibis has spread into southeastern Mexico during the last 20 years; however, the *Plegadis* sp. recorded in Honduras in 1953-1954 hint that Glossies may have appeared in the region much earlier. Small numbers of non-breeding immature Glossy Ibises probably now occur annually in the Yucatán Peninsula and have been recorded there between at least January and July. Strong evidence of breeding by Glossies in Mexico was obtained in July 1988, in the Usumacinta marshes following several sightings of *Plegadis* ibises in that area since 1972. In addition, the first records of the White-faced Ibis for the Yucatán Peninsula are documented, three birds on January 19, 1988 and a single immature on July 18, 1988, all in the Usumacinta marshes of southwestern Campeche.

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