

THE CAYENNE OR RIVER IBIS IN BRITISH GUIANA

(WITH ONE PHOTO)

By CASEY A. WOOD

CHARLES CHUBB (Birds of British Guiana, 1916, p. 147) has furnished us with practically all that we know about that interesting species, the Cayenne or River Ibis. In his account he states that there is no authentic record of its breeding season or of its nidification. That I am in a position to supply a few notes on these points is my apology for the following. Chubb gives a brief systematic description of the bird, the substance of which I quote herewith.

Harpiprion cayennensis. CAYENNE IBIS.

Harpiprion cayennensis (Gmel.), Syst. Nat. i. p. 652, 1789 ("Habitat in Cayenna"); Salvin, Ibis, 1886, p. 172 (Bartica Grove, Camacusa); Quelch, Timehri (2) ii. p. 373, 1888 (Arary River), iv. p. 334, 1890 (Berbice River), v. p. 107, 1891 (Georgetown); Sharpe, Cat. B. Brit. Mus. xxvi. pp. 25, 265, 1898; Brabourne & Chubb, B. S. Amer. i. p. 47, no. 448, 1912.

Ibis cayennensis Cab. in Schomb. Reis. Guian. iii. p. 757, 1848.

Ibis infuscata (nec Licht.), Cab. in Schomb. Reis. Guian. iii. p. 756, 1848; Brown, Canoe and Camp Life, p. 21, 1876 (Cuyuni River).

Phimosus infuscatus (nec Licht.), Salvin, Ibis, 1886, p. 171; Beebe, Our Search for a Wilderness, p. 253, 1910 (Cuyuni River). "Curi-curi" or River-Ibis (Brown); "Bush Curi-curi, Bush or Bronze Ibis" (Quelch).

Adult Male. General colour above and below oil-green with coppery reflections on the back and steel-blue on the quills and tail both above and below; under surface not so bright and mixed with dull black; top of head, sides of face, and throat dusky grey, somewhat darker on the throat; nape and hind-neck bright green. "Bill and feet light green" (Brown).

Total length 500 mm., culmen 103, wing 279, tail 141, tarsus 58. *Adult female.* Similar to the adult male. Wing 315 mm.

The description is based on an example obtained on the Arary River in September, 1906. *Range in British Guiana.* Upper Tukutu Mountains, Ituribisi River, Curubung River, Bartica, Arary River, Mazaruni River, Arwey Creek (McConnell collection); Bartica, Kamakusa (Whitely); Cuyuni River (Brown & Beebe); Berbice River, Georgetown (Quelch). *Extralimital Range,* Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru.

Habits. Schomburgk remarks (Reis. Guian. vol. ii, p. 503):—This species is fairly common and found mostly in pairs, and is not of a very shy nature. It seeks its food, which consists of water-insects, etc., on the edges of rivers. Towards dusk they fly away to roost in the woods. [See, also, translation by W. E. Roth, 1922.] This species lives singly or in pairs on the Savanna swamps and on the borders of the rivers. I have found it at an altitude of 1500 ft., but I was unable to discover its nest. The "Warraus" call it Korro-korro. Barrington Brown (Canoe and Camp Life in British Guiana, 1876, p. 22), gives the following note:—"The Curi-Curi or River Ibis (*Ibis infuscata*) gets its name from its cry, which resembles that word repeated a few times; they are of a dull olive-green colour, with light green bills and legs. They drill holes in the mud-banks with their long bills for worms, feeding after the manner of snipe." Mr. J. J. Quelch met with this species on the Arary River, and remarks that it rose at intervals from the bushes. He also observed it on the Berbice River and at Georgetown.

There is no additional reference to this bird in Chubb's second volume, published in 1922.

In February, 1922, while on a journey in the interior of British Guiana with four other white men, all more or less interested in ornithology, we saw

at rather close range, many South American birds, and had an unusual opportunity of studying their appearances and poses as well as an occasional nest. We were particularly fortunate in the case of the Bush Ibis. During the outward journey, on the upper Essequibo, while our boat was only a few yards from the shore, we surprised a solitary individual, evidently feeding, on the muddy bank of the stream. He did not appear to be frightened and did not at once take flight. As our Indian crew ceased paddling and we all kept still and quiet, we were able to inspect the bird at our leisure. Even if we



Fig. 58. NEST OF THE BUSH OR RIVER IBIS IN
BRITISH GUIANA.

had been in any doubt as to its identity, the exclamation of the paddlers, "curri-curri", would have prompted us. The day was rather overcast (the downpours were frequent) and that may have been the reason why we all agreed that the gray and green shades of the ibis' plumage, as well as of its mandibles and feet, appeared definitely *dark* instead of the light shades recorded by Barrington Brown and others. On the other hand, the iridescent sheen of the back and the bluish of the tail were strongly in evidence.

Farther inland, some 200 miles from the coast, above the junction of the

Essequibo with the Potaro, we saw another individual, with precisely the same markings, roosting on a large tree overhanging the water. Our boat carefully approached this bird, and again we had an excellent opportunity of examining him before he flew into the jungle. On paddling close to the branch on which the ibis had been roosting—less than ten yards from our eyes—we spied a nest that had been built some twenty feet from the river bank and the same distance from the surface of the stream. It was well sheltered from the tropical sun and rain by dense foliage above and on one side, though quite exposed toward the south. The nest itself, some fourteen inches in diameter, was loosely constructed of dry twigs lined with finer material, that may have been moss. In any event, it was possible to see all the rough, outer structure of the nest but not its contents. Peering over the margin of the structure were the heads and necks of two nestlings fairly feathered in dark gray, with wide-open eyes, mandibles undeveloped but showing the ibidine type. The nest was deep enough entirely to hide the youngsters when they withdrew their heads. Plainly noticeable on each side of the head was a uniform, rather wide circumorbital ring of white.

We did not further disturb the immature birds, but decided to confine our activities to recording such changes in them as might occur during the five days that would elapse before our return journey. We were at the moment content carefully to note the exact appearance of the nestlings' upper parts, arranging to take, later, snapshots of the nest, its contents and its neighborhood. The nesting tree was what is known to the natives as the "serebandanni", or sap tree, an account of which is given by the government forester, Hohenkerk, in *Timehri*, v, ser. 2, p. 114. It is a fine hardwood, its foliage suggesting one of our northern maples; and it attains a medium height of 50 feet. So far, it does not seem to have been systematically identified—like so many other South American trees.

On the return trip, five days later, we had no difficulty in locating the nest, but at first glance we thought, especially as we saw no trace of the parent birds, that the young had flown. On our shaking and pulling neighboring branches, however, two heads protruded above the margin of the apparently empty shelter. The trouble we had to induce the nestlings to show themselves argued that they had not only considerably developed in five days but that they had, perhaps, profited by parental instruction. The chicks had also acquired more gray feathers on the head and neck. The principal difference, noted by all the members of the party, was the fading of the previously well-marked white circle about each eye, a ring of color that had stood out less than a week before as the most striking part of the upper plumage.

As it was not practicable to do more than take a few photographs of the nest and young, I refer the reader to the accompanying illustration (fig. 58). Unfortunately, none of the six snapshots turned out, when developed a week or so later, as well as we hoped, a common experience in the tropics with films not promptly dealt with; but this one will serve to show the general characters of the tree and of the ibis nest.

Chicago, Illinois, March 10, 1923.