

THE WOOD IBIS IN YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

WITH ONE ILLUSTRATION

By JOSEPH DIXON

On June 28, 1930, George M. Wright, Ben H. Thompson and the writer found a lone Wood Ibis (*Mycteria americana*) feeding in a shallow pond near the junction of the Yellowstone and Lamar rivers in Yellowstone National Park.

In the United States this species breeds along the hot moist bottomlands of our southern states where they border on the Gulf of Mexico. Its presence in mid-summer in Yellowstone therefore came as a distinct surprise to us, but in going over the literature we find that there are two other similar records for this species in that region. Mr. A. C. Bent, in his "Life Histories of North American Marsh Birds" (Bull. no. 135, U. S. Nat. Mus., 1926, p. 65), states: "Stragglers . . . have been taken or noted north to Montana (southwestern part of the State, June 18, 1911); Wyoming (Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, July 16, 1925)."

The bird which we had under observation for several hours was doubtless the same individual that had been seen by various persons at Rainy Lake, where a ranger reported that a black bear had stalked the ibis and had approached to within ten feet of the bird before it became alarmed and took flight.

The unusual tameness of this individual contrasted with Bent's statement that "the wood ibis is an exceedingly shy bird". The further fact that the ibis, when under close observation, was found to have its neck and the posterior portion of its head still covered with dusky feathers of the immature bird, taken together with its tameness, leads me to conclude that it was a bird in its second year, since it lacked the brown tipped scapulars and tertials that are to be found in the first winter plumage and had not as yet acquired the scaly, bare head and neck of the adult bird.

When ready to forage, the ibis selected one of the smaller shallow ponds free from entangling tules. Here it waded sedately along, keeping in water that was from six to fifteen inches deep (see fig. 109). At intervals it reached down with its long, heavy, curved bill, sometimes submerging its entire head, in search of living fresh-water snails. Having located a mollusk, it separated it from the mud or moss and then, holding it in the tip of its flexible bill, sloshed it back and forth in the water, rinsing and freeing it from all débris. Then, giving its bill a little flip, it caught and swallowed the morsel after crushing the paper-like shell of the snail in its strong mandibles. At other times the bird worked over masses of algae with its bill for water beetles which it caught and then swallowed. When swallowing a large morsel, the bird's bill was sometimes elevated and the neck extended, although normally the food was swallowed without the bill being raised.

When foraging, the ibis moved its feet very deliberately. First one foot and then the other was slowly raised, the leg thrust forward and put down into the water again, with the minimum of disturbance. Such a procedure was helpful when stalking young frogs, which I twice saw the ibis successfully accomplish.

By 8:30 o'clock in the evening the ibis showed signs of wanting to go to sleep for the night. There were numerous bare granite boulders protruding above the water out in the pond where the ibis was feeding, and we expected that it would spend the night perched on one of these isolated rocks, away from the shore. However, the bird chose as its roosting place an open stretch of the pond where the water was about one foot deep and where there was no screening vegetation behind which

a lurking enemy might approach. Here the ibis settled itself for the night, lifting one leg slightly and drawing its neck down so that its heavy bill rested on its shoulders, and went to sleep. However, it was sensitive to the slightest noise or movement made within thirty feet of it, and, when alarmed, the bird would rouse up and wade out into the deeper, open water away from the shore.

A Horned Owl visited the pond while we were watching, but made no attempt



Fig. 109. WOOD IBIS FORAGING IN A POND IN YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK.

to molest the ibis. Muskrats swam about within six feet of the ibis but the bird paid no attention to them. By ten o'clock in the evening the ibis had settled itself for the night and we left it, but when I again visited the pond at 4:38 o'clock the next morning I found the bird actively foraging in another shallow pond near-by.

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