

A WHITE IBIS NEAR SHERIDAN, WYOMING

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A 7-year-old ranch boy, Charles Collins, found "a funny white bird" in a small marshy pond near his home on Lower Piney Creek about 40 km SSE of Sheridan, Wyoming, on 12 September 1976. His father, Bruce Collins, identified it as a White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*). Marian Collins (not a relative) and I arrived at the pond at about 0730 on 13 September. The pond, situated in a pasture, was not more than 8 m across and had cattail (*Typha*) growth and two tree stumps standing in water near its center. The rest of the pasture was rather level and dry with short grass clipped off by the cattle present. The entire valley is made up of such pastures, some plowed and planted fields, some native grasses and sagebrush (*Artemisia*), cottonwoods (*Populus*) and willows (*Salix*) along the stream plus large brushy areas. Low hills rise on either side. Several marshy ponds are in the area — two quite extensive. Piney Creek flows generally from southwest to northeast through the valley.

As we drove up I saw the bird in the shallow water among some vegetation and near a tree stump. I saw the back of the head (neck drawn back) and the bird's back — it was white with some dirt on the plumage. The bird turned its head and revealed the long, pinkish-red, down-curved heavy bill clearly — truly an adult White Ibis.

We parked the car within 40 m of the bird and observed it, using 7x35 binoculars. The bird was preening in full sun. Its bill was about as long as its neck, about 30 cm. It had much bare, bright red skin visible on the face, up as much as 5 cm over the eye and covering the face area. This red skin was as wide as 5 cm in a sort of square area below the eye. The ibis hopped up onto the stump spreading its wings and exposing its black wing tips and long, pinkish-red legs. I used a 40x scope to better view its face and noted that the bird had a black pupil and a yellow iris.

We watched the ibis for about an hour, and again later that morning we watched it with Platt H. Hall as it fed in the pasture among the cattle. I guessed it was picking up grasshoppers, which were abundant. The ibis walked rather deliberately but not as slowly as a Great Blue Heron. It moved its head, chicken-like, back and forth as it walked. The ranchers said that the stump in the center of the pond appeared to be a favorite perch, as the ibis returned to it again and again.

The White Ibis was still present at the original site until about noon on 13 September 1976, according to the ranchers. On 14 September 1976 Oliver K. Scott and I thoroughly searched all the sloughs, marshy areas and ponds in the area but were unable to find the bird.

The sighting represents a first state record as far as I can determine. N.W. Whitney cited a record in Bent (1926): two White Ibis were seen and one was collected in southeastern South Dakota in May 1879. Bent also noted a few near Ogden, Utah, 1 September to 8 October 1871; a specimen taken at Barr Lake, Colorado, in 1890; and others as far north as Illinois, Vermont, Connecticut and New York in 1878, 1878, 1875 and 1836-43, respectively. Recent bird checklists for Wyoming, Montana and Colorado do not include the White Ibis.

Scott suggested that the bird might be an escapee. Two small aviaries near Sheridan have never had a White Ibis. Ann Schimpf checked the Salt Lake City area with negative results; Esther Serr had the same results in the Rapid City, South Dakota, area; P.D. Skaar knew of no such captive bird in the Bozeman or Billings, Montana, areas; and Hugh Kingery wrote that the bird was not an escapee from the Denver, Colorado, area. No information was received through the National Zoo Keepers' publication.

One might wonder if the bird was an albino White-faced Ibis (*Plegadis chihii*), a rare spring migrant in the Sheridan area. This possibility is ruled out by the bird's black

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pupil and yellow iris, very red facial skin, bright pinkish-red bill and legs, and black wing tips.

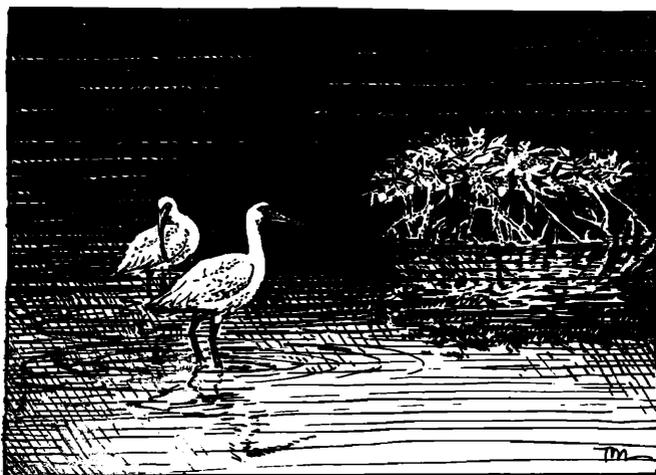
Some investigation has been made about how the White Ibis might have appeared here. The National Weather Service office personnel in Sheridan reported that, off the coast of Baja California during late August and early September, two or three tropical depressions had strong winds aloft at about 10,000 to 12,000 feet — fully strong enough to bring such a bird to this area. They also said that Hurricane Kathleen, which had moved up through Baja California into the Southwest at the time, was not responsible for the air mass over Sheridan from 10-13 September 1976, although the hurricane “. . . produced record rains as far north as Idaho” (Kaufman 1977:145). The probability of the White Ibis wandering to Wyoming from the Gulf of Mexico or Florida seems unlikely as a high pressure area with mild wind velocities was situated just east of the Rocky Mountains.

Of the ornithologists and qualified birders who expressed an opinion concerning the origin of the White Ibis in northeastern Wyoming, three suggested it was a post-breeding wanderer but declined to guess from where, and four thought that it was brought here via the southwestern United States by the strong weather pattern aloft. I favor the latter explanation.

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White Ibis

Sketch by Tim Manolis