

ANHINGA IN NASSAU COUNTY

THOMAS H. DAVIS and ANTHONY J. LAURO

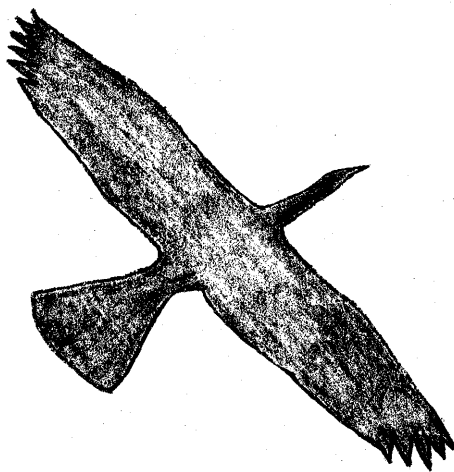
On 23 July 1977 the authors observed an Anhinga (*Anhinga anhinga*) at Middle Line Island, situated at the western end of South Oyster Bay, about one mile south of Seaford, Nassau County.

The bird was observed for two or three minutes soaring in thermal updrafts, drifting to the southwest and then out of sight. Lauro viewed the bird with 7 x 50 binoculars, and Davis with 9 x 35 binoculars and briefly with a 20 x 60 spotting scope. Riding the thermals near the Anhinga were several Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*). Based on his familiarity with Herring Gulls soaring over New York City skyscrapers, Davis judged these birds' altitude to be 800-1000 feet.

The Anhinga exceeded the gulls in size, especially in overall length and in the breadth of its wings. It appeared wholly black below, slightly paler toward the base of the flight feathers. If the tail had any light tipping, this was not evident against a bright overcast sky. The wings were held straight out, primaries fanned apart at the tip. The head and neck projected straight forward from the body, not quite as long as the tail extended behind. The most remarkable feature about the bird was the tail, which extended behind nearly as far as the wings projected out from the body, and which was slightly fanned.

Although Anhingas are known as "snakebirds" because of their long, sinuous necks, this character is not apparent during soaring flight, when they are more appropriately dubbed "water turkeys" for their long fan-shaped tails. Davis' illustration of a soaring Anhinga, adapted from a slide transparency obtained elsewhere, depicts the species much as we viewed it over Middle Line Island.

A third birder, who wishes to remain anonymous, was present with us at the time of this sighting. Immediately following the observa-



tion, this person complained of the poor view, said that he experienced difficulty holding his binoculars steady on the bird directly overhead and that the bird was simply a silhouette lacking color. In a subsequent letter to Davis he commented, "my pros are 1) the tail shape and character, 2) the soaring behavior, 3) the wing pattern and style of holding same — my contras are 1) the neck and head were not long enough or 2) thin enough as I remember the Anhinga in Texas. It might have been an Anhinga—or a Cormorant—I'm just not sure." A statement in a later letter to Lauro is contradictory—"the character of the tail was good but that is not diagnostic as I'm sure you are aware." We are not aware of how or when the Anhinga's distinctive tail is not a good field character according to all reference works consulted, or from Davis' experience in separating Anhingas from cormorants in the American tropics. We repeat, that while the long, thin head and neck of swimming, sitting, or flying Anhingas is a prominent feature, this is retracted in soaring flight, when the bird's foreparts pale in significance to the distinctive tail. We would rather have deleted mention of this person's participation in this sighting but correspondence and conversation generated by this person did not permit this maneuver. The editors of *The Kingbird* especially felt that this person's presence and doubt about the identification could not be neglected.

Palmer (1962, *Handbook of North American Birds*, vol. 1, p. 361) states that Anhingas breed north to central North Carolina along the Atlantic coast, while a Mississippi River valley population breeds as far north as southern Missouri. Stragglers have been noted as far north as southern New Jersey, southern Ohio, and southern Ontario. The Anhinga's habit of soaring suggests how individuals may occasionally be displaced. The Middle Line Island sighting followed nine consecutive days of southwesterly winds and daily maximum temperatures above 90° F. The winds on 23 July were from the northwest at about 10 mph. The fact that Anhingas soar to great heights further suggests how easy it would be to overlook a passing bird. This report of an Anhinga at Middle Line Island constitutes the first record of this species in New York State, albeit a hypothetical record in the absence of a specimen, photograph, or agreement by three observers.

9446 85 Road, Woodhaven, NY 11421 and
9 DeSoto Road, Amityville, NY 11701