

PHOTOGRAPHS OF NEW YORK STATE RARITIES
34. WHITE-FACED IBIS

THOMAS H. DAVIS



White-faced Ibis. Pearsall's Hassock, Nassau County.
May 8, 1979 *Harry Darrow*

In North America, the White-faced Ibis (*Plegadis chihi*) is primarily a western species breeding regularly east to Nebraska and coastal Louisiana. Vagrants have occurred east to Michigan, Ohio, and western New York. The New York records prior to 1979 were two specimens, both collected at Grand Island along the Niagara River: August 1844 (NYSM 205) and 18 September 1908, the latter specimen no longer extant (J. Bull, 1974. *Birds of New York State*, p. 95).

The White-faced Ibis began to show signs of expansion in the mid-1970's. In 1976 the species bred for the first time in Alabama (*Am. Birds* 30: 966, 1976). In 1978 it bred for the first time in North and South Dakota (*Am. Birds* 32: 1176, 1978). In 1979, this species was found breeding for the first time since 1901, in San Diego County, CA. (P. Unitt, 1979, *Sketches* Vol. 30, p. 6). In addition, extralimital White-faced Ibises were noted at Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge, North Carolina, in mid-May 1973 and at Brigantine National Wildlife Refuge, Tuckerton, New Jersey, 17-21 April, 1977 (*Am. Birds* 31: 979, 1977). Limiting factors in documenting this expansion on the East Coast have been the fact that observers have not been looking for the species among the hordes of Glossy Ibises (*P. falcinellus*), and the fact that they have not known what to look for. Illustrations in the standard field guides are largely inadequate. Don Eckelberry accurately portrays their differences in the Richard H. Pough's *Audubon Water Bird Guide* (1956, Doubleday and Co., Garden City, N.Y.). The finest article and illustrations detailing their field separation was produced by H. Douglas Pratt in the Jan.-Feb. 1976 issue of *Birding* (8: 1-5).

In 1979, three or four adult White-faced Ibises were noted along the Atlantic Coast, including a pair that probably nested in New York, and a bird observed in early July at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, Virginia, but not seen thereafter (*vide* Richard Rowlett, details to be published elsewhere).

On 10 June the author, with Guy Tudor and Michele Monnier, discovered a breeding-plumaged bird at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, Queens County. Thereafter a single adult White-faced Ibis was seen regularly through July at the West Pond, where numbers of Ibises come to drink and bathe. On departure from the pond the ibis always flew directly to Ruffle Bar, a mile and a half to the southwest, the site of Jamaica Bay's largest heronry. Beginning in late July, swelling numbers of juvenal ibises began to appear at the pond. On August 4 the author noted a pair of adult White-faced Ibises with Glossies at the West Pond; these birds were observed together or individually until 7 September. It is likely that the species bred at Ruffle Bar, that up to fledging young in late July one bird was always confined to the nest while the other fed, visited the West Pond, then returned to relieve it. Recognizable photographs of one or the other White-faced Ibis were obtained by Peter W. Post, Don Riepe, and myself. My observations on one and/or the other White-faced Ibis's

plumage and soft-part color changes were as follows:

- 10 June—bare facial skin pinkish-red, eye darker red, bordered entirely by broad white feathering; legs dull red; rest of plumage similar to Glossy Ibis.
- 23 June—slightly faded . . . white “face” now ragged at edge, legs faded to pinkish especially on knees and feet.
- 8 July—white “face” and extent of pinkish-red facial skin much reduced, eyes red, legs flesh with pink knees.
- 22 July—no longer has white feathering around face, bare facial skin dull pinkish-red, eyes red, leg color about same as Glossy.
- 4 Aug.—pair observed for first time . . . both showed prominent ruby red eyes, one opened gape exhibiting a bright pinkish-red lining.
- 26 Aug.—pair seen . . . both with ruby red eyes, one still retained small pinkish-red facial skin area and pinkish knees.
- 1 Sept.—the brighter adult observed 26 Aug. remains about the same.
- 23 Sept.—ibis numbers are much reduced from a week ago, couldn’t locate White-faced.

On 3 September, 1979, I received a communication from Harry Darrow, a bird photographer. On a visit to Pearsall’s Hassock, Nassau County, New York 8 May, 1979 Harry took a number of ibis flight shots, hoping to capture “the iridescence on the wing.” At least two rolls of film were exposed and when editing the results Harry “threw small images into a separate box.” Months later he was about “to throw them out but thought (he) should view them on a screen, just to be sure. Zappo, the second slide was a White-faced!” Reproduced here in black and white, this color transparency shows a breeding-plumaged White-faced Ibis much like the one I described on 10 June at Jamaica Bay, only 8 miles to the west. Pearsall’s Hassock is also the site of a large heronry.

9446-85 Road, Woodhaven, New York 11421.