

WHITE IBIS—A NEW BREEDING BIRD IN ALABAMA

By JAMES E. KEELER

For the first time in the history of ornithology, the White Ibis, *Guara alba*, has been found nesting in Alabama. Although these birds have been known to breed in north Florida for many years, no one interested in birds had ever reported seeing their nests in Alabama until May, 1956.

During early May a report reached the Department of Conservation that a tremendous colony of "white cranes" were nesting at Southfield Lake in north Baldwin County. The birds were described as being fairly large white birds with black wing-tips and long downward curved bills. To an ornithologist this was like a pirate finding a chest of gold. Although the birds themselves are fairly commonly seen in the southern half of Alabama during the summer and early fall months, their nests could be considered the "find of the year" in the bird world.

A trip was made to Southfield Lake on May 30, to verify this report. At this time an estimated 7,000 nests located on a small island were seen. From a distance the trees and bushes on the island appeared to be covered with snow. As the boat neared the island the "snow" turned out to be 10,000 or more adult White Ibis sitting on nests and perching on limbs. The air around the colony was flecked with white as the birds made their way to and from their feeding grounds.

A constant whistling soon became evident, as we neared the island, caused by thousands of nestling birds. This odd sound never ceased as long as we were on the island and in all probability continues on and on throughout the daylight hours during the duration of the nesting season. The sound would be enough to drive a person crazy if he had to listen to it for days on end. Oddly enough the adult birds rarely emitted a sound unless we approached too close to them.

The island containing the nesting colony is approximately four acres in size and is composed chiefly of hardwood trees, button bushes and a jungle of vines. Only about two acres of the island is used by the birds for nesting. The majority of the trees and vines contained very few leaves since the birds had stripped and used them for nest construction.

Upon reaching the island, we found that nests were located in just about every conceivable place possible. A few nests were even found built on the bare ground. The majority of the nests ranged from three to twenty feet above the ground while others were located in the very tops of the trees. One small tree contained sixty-four nests.

The initial survey revealed four other species of birds nesting within the ibis colony, however, they were neither as plentiful nor as conspicuous. During May 30 and 31, sixty-five nestling White Ibis were banded as well as four Snowy Egrets, three American Egrets, thirteen Yellow-crowned Night Herons and six Little Blue Herons. The Little Blue Herons were the next most common nesting bird.

The great majority of the ibis nests contained four eggs or newly hatched young. It was decided that the proper banding time would be in about two weeks. The U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Bird Banding Office was notified and 2,000 bands were received. It was noticed that when the nestlings became large enough to band they would leave the nests when approached and would climb out of reach. A method was devised to catch these birds by using the old fashioned chicken catcher, which was a wire hook that would hold a chicken by the leg. It was found that the chicken catchers would not work if the birds were caught by the leg. This caused them to grip the limbs very tightly with their feet and would have caused a great many broken legs. We found that by catching the young birds around the neck with the wire hook they would relax their grip and would be lowered without injury for banding.

A banding expedition was organized for June 14. The party consisted of Dr. Oliver Austin, Jr., Dr. Julian Dusi, Thomas Imhof, Wayne Colin, Walter Beshears, Jr., and the author. The trip up the Alabama River from Boatyard Lake to the cabin site at Southfield Lake was completed in about an hour. From there the necessary equipment was carried about one-fourth of a mile to the lakesite. Through the courtesy of Bill Wiggins, member of the Southfield Hunting and Fishing Club, two boats were available for our use on the lake.

Little time was lost in getting to the island. Upon reaching the island the party split up into groups of threes. Two men would catch the active nestlings

and the third man would open the bands and place them on the young birds' legs. Without the use of the wire catchers fastened to long cane poles, it would have been impossible to catch and band many of the young birds. The nestling birds were so agile that we soon found it unnecessary to replace them in the trees but would drop them on the ground where they would run to a bush or vine and climb it with the dexterity of a monkey, using both feet and their long curved beaks to gain leverage. It was almost unbelievable how readily they could catch hold of a twig or vine and climb. A young bird could be tossed at any bush or vine and would instantly grasp it with feet and bill and soon right itself and climb away.

The actual banding operation certainly could not be called pleasant. With thousands of adult and nestling birds using this small area, every vine and limb was covered with reddish-colored fecal matter. With hundreds of birds above us at all times it appeared to be raining red ochre. We soon learned by experience never to look up. The ground was actually red with the droppings, caused by the digested remains of crayfish, which comprises a large part of the bird's diet.

During the afternoon we banded 1,200 nestling birds before it became time to leave. Never were there six dirtier men when we left the colony. Fresh air and clean surroundings were very much appreciated.

Since we had 800 more bands on hand another expedition was arranged for June 21. This party consisted of Thomas McKinney, Department of Conservation Staff Photographer, Reynolds Thrasher, Lloyd Crawford, James Stinson, Roy Colquitt, and the author. We soon found that using the remaining 800 bands was going to be hard work since the young birds had grown so large that they would not only climb out of reach of the wire catchers but could now jump from one bush to another. We spent the entire afternoon chasing and catching 800 young birds. We had reached our goal in banding 2,046 young White Ibis. We learned later than only 716 White Ibis had ever been banded before.

The White Ibis can be distinguished from the Herons and Egrets in having a long decurved bill; pink bill, face and legs, and black wing tips. It is the only "crane like" bird with black wing tips with the exception of its larger cousin, the Wood Ibis.

The diet of the White Ibis consists of aquatic in-

sects, crayfish, mollusks, worms, small fish, frogs and various other small animals. Their feeding places are usually mud flats where they wade in shallow water, sweeping their bills to and fro and occasionally probing in the mud and soft sand.

The young birds are dull grayish-brown with the rump, base of tail and underparts white. They do not assume the adult plumage until they are two years of age. The White Ibis is a wandering bird in the late summer months. Usually the young of the year wander farther north than the adults. During the fall and winter months the birds migrate to Central and South America. It is hoped that by banding a portion of these birds from year to year that more will be learned concerning their life histories and movements.

The actual number of birds banded as a result of the three trips to Southfield Lake was 2,077. Of this number, 2,046 were White Ibis, fifteen were Yellow-crowned Night Herons; eight were little Blue Herons; five were Snowy Egrets; and three were American Egrets.

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