



A pair of courting White Ibises in breeding plumage in March. They are beginning their third year (or older) as sexually mature adults.



White Ibises have mostly white to fully white backs by July of their second summer, like this one foraging in the salt marsh near Ft. Caswell.

Brunswick Wildlife Battery's White Ibises upgrade their Wardrobes

On a beautiful Sunday morning in mid-April I arrived in Southport thirty minutes before the coffee shop opened. Luckily I had my binoculars, newspaper, and a half-filled coffee tankard. I proceeded to Waterfront Park to watch the sunrise and look for birds while waiting for another jolt of java.

Something had changed since my last visit. A few flocks of large white birds were streaming back and forth across the river from Battery Island, a local summer ritual that had been missing the past three years. Southport's avian celebrity, the White Ibis, was returning to Battery Island to nest.

Through the summer, we watched thousands in small foraging flocks fly out to swamps to catch crayfish and other freshwater prey for their young. Now that the young have fledged, foraging flocks, made up of several generations of ibises, may be seen on grass fields and pastures. This article may help you identify them by plumage and age while sorting out other species of waders that may be foraging with them.

Seems to me there is a hard-and-fast rule in fashion that one doesn't wear white after Labor Day. Yes? No? Don't tell our ibises...or me for that matter. The former includes more and more white regardless of the change in season and I wear my white shoes year round.

The first-year ibis photographed at Ft. Fisher in January 2012 was hatched in late spring 2011. Its dark juvenal plumage (see an example in the flock photo) had already molted into the typical light brown back, white belly, lightly brown-streaked head and neck, and pinkish/orange (salmon-colored) face and bill.

As feathers are replaced through its second spring and summer, the plumage will become increasingly white until it has molted into its definitive basic plumage by the beginning of its third summer. Its feathers will all be white, except for tips of its three or four longest primaries which will have iridescent dark green tips.

Breeding plumage, sexual maturity, and its initial breeding will soon follow. During approximately ten days of peak breeding plumage, its bill, face, and legs will be bright scarlet instead of salmon, after which the salmon color will return.

In the photo of the flock, assuming the ibis near the center with the reddish bill is an adult, I see two other ibis plumages. From left to right, the ibis on the far left is a first-summer bird in juvenal plumage with three second-summer birds coming next. The presumed adult is next followed by another second-summer ibis and a “ringer”. The ringer is a first-summer Little Blue Heron.

PS I was kidding about the white shoes; however, I do consider kakis appropriate for any occasion and I ensure my flannel shirts do not clash with the patterns of my camouflaged caps. Is that fashion sense or what?

John Ennis



Born in late spring of the previous year, a first-winter juvenile forages near Ft. Fisher in early January. Note the cool juxtaposition of bill, reflection, and shadow!



Try to identify the different plumages in this photo.
Hint: Assuming the ibis near the center is an adult, I see three plus a “ringer”.



Juvenile White Ibis



Adults head out from Battery Island to forage in freshwater swamps