



Brunswick Wildlife Battery Island's "Other" Ibis

By late spring Southport's avian celebrity, the White Ibis, has returned to Battery Island to nest. They will be watched by many of us throughout the summer as thousands stream back and forth across the river in small foraging flocks. Lost in the crowd is the other ibis...the Glossy Ibis.

Growth of the wading bird colonies on Battery Island and the spoil islands up river are well documented. White Ibises were first reported nesting here in the 1940's and in 1956 there were fifteen nests. Managed by Audubon North Carolina, Battery Island became an Audubon Sanctuary in 1982 and it has been designated an Important Bird Area.

Battery Island supports the largest colony of wading birds in the state, including approximately ten percent of North America's White Ibises. Audubon's mid-May census reported 13,749 White Ibis nests. Their cousin? Seven Glossy Ibis nests were reported.

Why is Battery Island for the birds? Habitat! Wading birds nest in the red cedars, yaupon and other shrubs on the higher, southern end of the island. The island is protected from mammalian predators such as raccoons by the strong currents of the Cape Fear River plus Audubon enforces a year-round ban on human activity. Also, the island is located close to fresh water wetlands that provide crustaceans for ibis nestlings that cannot tolerate the salty marine prey of adults.

The Glossy Ibis is a wading bird with a long, decurved bill for tactile foraging, probing the muck for crustaceans. Insects are also an important dietary source. Its beautiful plumage is metallic bronze, with green iridescent highlights, especially noticeable on flight feathers in bright light.

The Glossy is not the "Rodney Dangerfield" of wading birds. It is respected as the most widespread species of ibis worldwide, having populations from Maine to Central and South America to southern Europe, Africa, Madagascar, Indonesia, Asia, India, and Australia. Though greatly outnumbered by White Ibis on the east coast, the Glossy Ibis has vastly

expanded their range over the past century into North America going from rare and local in Florida to a locally common breeder as far north as Maine.

Like the White Ibis, the Glossy may be found on our coast year round. After breeding, they disperse widely and may travel long distances to our north, followed by a migration by most birds to the south to their wintering grounds in Florida, the Gulf Coast, and beyond.

I usually see a small flock of Glossy Ibises flying between Fort Fisher and Southport several times a year. The above Glossy Ibis photo is of a juvenile taken in mid-September 2006 at Zeke's Island National Estuarine Research Reserve. The White Ibis was photographed over the river on its way to Battery Island.

Many folks were very concerned and asked me what happened to the White Ibis last year. They went missing!

According to Audubon officials the ibises have nested at a site other than Battery Island only twice in the past thirty years. In 1991 all of the lower Cape Fear River ibises nested upriver at North Pelican Island. In 2006 they did the same; however, only half of the normal number of pairs nested. The 2006 location of the other adults is still unknown.

Audubon searched Battery Island for reasons ibises might abandon nesting sites such as evidence of mammalian predators and human disturbance but none was found. However, a possible culprit may have been an avian predator, the Great Horned Owl, which was seen on Battery Island through April at a time when the ibis would normally be settling in before breeding.

Audubon believes that the ibises were attracted to North Pelican Island by the great number of nesting pelicans, egrets, and other wading birds that had already initiated nesting by the time the ibises arrived. As you can see by the May 2007 census data above, they are back!

So the show goes on. The Glossy should be sought as a rarity. As you enjoy the large numbers of ibises overhead look for the "other ibis". Visiting family and friends from out of town, whether or not they are birders, will appreciate watching the show, especially if the Glossy becomes an addition to their life bird list.

John Ennis

The description of Battery Island, census information, and 2006 "missing ibis" information were derived from Audubon North Carolina's website or provided directly by Audubon officials.