

# General Field Notes

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## Scarlet Ibis Found Breeding in South Carolina

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On April 16, 2001, while conducting a routine review of a wetland delineation, I observed a dark pink ibis at the edge of the Buckfield Plantation backwater rookery near McPhersonville, Hampton County, South Carolina. The bird was sitting on a nest in a large rookery dominated by White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*), perhaps 10,000 pair, and also including other colonial nesters such as the Wood Stork (*Mycteria americana*), Anhinga (*Anhinga anhinga*), Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*), Tricolored Heron (*Egretta tricolor*), and Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*). The nest was located approximately 3 meters from the ground in a swamp blackgum (*Nyssa biflora*) growing in approximately .3 meters of standing water. The canopy also featured sweet gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) and red maple (*Acer rubrum*); while the understory was composed of wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*), button bush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*), greenbriar (*Smilax rotundifolia*), ludwigia (*Ludwigia decurrens*) and Virginia chain fern (*Woodwardia virginica*).

The accepted general range of the Scarlet Ibis is the coastal area of northern South America (Palmer, 1962). It is regarded as accidental or casual in North America, with records from Florida, Louisiana, and Texas (A.O.U., 1999; Howell, 1932; Oberholser, 1974). Most records from North America are regarded as storm-related stragglers or escapes from zoos.

The first mention of the Scarlet Ibis in South Carolina comes from Alexander Wilson (1808), who mentioned that it occurs in the southern parts of Carolina. The inclusion of South Carolina in this range account has generally been disregarded since no evidence was provided to support a South Carolina record. Recent records of brightly colored ibis from South Carolina include one from Sullivan's Island in September 1987 (Post and Gauthreaux, 1989) and two from Winyah Bay (near Georgetown) in May 1989 (De Santo, 1997). The 1987 bird was declared a hybrid, but the writer left open the possibility that it was a



Scarlet Ibis breeding in Hampton County, SC.  
Photos by Murry Thompson.

Scarlet Ibis in faded plumage (Post and Gauthreaux, 1989; Belser, 1989). None of these birds was found nesting.

The ibis found at Buckfield Plantation backwater was a dark, vivid pink, Smithe color 13 – geranium pink with black wing tips (Smithe, 1975). This color is but one hue off of scarlet (color 14). The feet, legs, lores, and orbital area of this bird were bright scarlet. The color of the soft parts of this bird was much deeper than those of the white ibis nesting nearby. The bill was dark brown grading into pink near its base. The iris was blue.

The identification of this bird is complicated by the question of whether it is a Scarlet x White Ibis hybrid or whether it is a Scarlet Ibis in faded plumage. Discussion of the plumage is further complicated by the fact that the Scarlet Ibis takes three to four years to obtain its full adult plumage but may be sexually mature at three years (Bent, 1926). In South America, the older, blood red adults are known to nest first followed by those in faded plumages, supporting the assertion that not all nesting Scarlet Ibis are in full adult plumage (Bent, 1926).

Scarlet Ibis x White Ibis hybridization is noted by Selby (2000), who describes the plumage as “variable rosy-pink.” Careful examination of the photographs by Dr. Dennis Forsythe led him to support the identification in favor of the “true” Scarlet Ibis rather than the hybrid. The plumage of this particular specimen is in keeping with the third nuptial described by Oberholser as “similar to nuptial adults, but head and neck paler – peach red to rose red.” Additionally, this species is known to lose its color rapidly in captivity, resulting in a rose tone rather than the deep scarlet found in South America. This phenomenon has been attributed to a lack of carotenoids in the diet, an item formerly supplied by tropical crustaceans abundant in coastal South American waters (Bent, 1926; Fox, 1962). Given the fact that plumage color is determined by the diet at the time the feathers were acquired, it seems apparent that this bird traveled a considerable distance from a tropical locale (Bird, 1997).

One puzzling aspect of the identification was the iris color. Palmer describes the Scarlet Ibis iris as “very dark brownish.” The iris of this bird was blue, as is that of the White Ibis. Dr. Richard Banks of the Smithsonian Institution questioned if Palmer was correct since no other authors offer an iris color. He also postulated that eye color may be related to age (Banks, 2001).

The bird was extensively photographed with both 300 mm and 400 mm lenses by the author and Dr. Murry Thompson on April 16 and again on April 18, 2001. (Photos page 142.) The bird was last observed on April 20. A strong windstorm passed through the area on April 22, and a revisit to the site on April 30 found the nest and those of adjacent White Ibis destroyed and much of the rookery abandoned.

The immature Scarlet Ibis, like the White Ibis, is known to disperse over great distances (Palmer, 1962). Deprived of the tropical marine crustaceans that provide vivid plumage, this bird was fading as it adapted to life in the Lowcountry of South Carolina. If this individual is determined to be a Scarlet

Ibis (*Eudocimus ruber*), it will be the first recorded in South Carolina and the first to have been found nesting in the state.

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