

Status of the Scarlet Ibis in South Carolina: Historical Records from John Abbot and Alexander Wilson

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The brilliantly plumaged Scarlet Ibis (*Eudocimus ruber*) is among the most attractive wading birds of the New World. Although the contemporary range of the species is confined largely to the coast and neighboring islands of northern South America, the bird was reported occasionally at widely scattered locales in North America during the nineteenth century. Sprunt and Chamberlain (1970) and Potter et. al. (1980) give no records of the bird from South Carolina, although observations in the early 1800's by John Abbot and Alexander Wilson suggest that the species should be considered for inclusion on the state's hypothetical list.

John Abbot was born in London in 1751, emigrated to Virginia in 1773, and relocated to the lower Savannah River valley by early 1776, remaining there until his death around 1840. An experienced artist and naturalist prior to leaving England, Abbot soon emerged as one of the most talented and certainly the most prolific illustrator of insects and birds in North America during his lifetime. Abbot's meticulous ornithological observations were used extensively by John Latham (1801; 1821-1824) and Alexander Wilson in their writings. Over 1200 of Abbot's skillfully crafted watercolor drawings of American birds have survived into modern times, distributed among museums and private collections in England and the United States (Simpson, 1984).

Two of these collections of Abbot's paintings contain watercolor drawings of the Scarlet Ibis. Abbot's largest extant collection, the Egerton set at the British Museum (Natural History) in London, is entitled "Drawings and Natural History, of the Birds of Georgia, in America . . . by John Abbot." The set consists of 297 paintings, and plate number 238 is a strikingly colored Scarlet Ibis. Abbot's accompanying text states "It is a Rare Bird in these parts," and he gives measurements that suggest he had collected the species. Although undated, the Egerton set was probably executed over a period of time between 1791 and 1815. The second drawing of the species appears in the manuscript volume "Drawings of the Birds of Georgia by John Abbot," presently located at the Houghton Library of Harvard University. Among the 181 drawings extant from this group, plate number 161 represents the Scarlet Ibis. Although most of this collection is also undated, various clues suggest that it was crafted between 1801 and 1815 (Simpson, 1984).

While these observations were ostensibly from Georgia, it is well known that Abbot conducted his forays along both sides of the Savannah River, and his writings not infrequently mention South Carolina. Although there is no direct evidence to support the supposition, it is quite possible that Abbot told Alexander Wilson that the Scarlet Ibis had been noted in South Carolina. Abbot met Wilson during the latter's southern tour of 1809, when the two men spent time in the field and exchanged information on the birds of the Southeast. Wilson had probably learned of Abbot's activities from their mutual friend Charles W. Peale of Philadelphia, who knew of Abbot's bird work as early as 1805 (Peale, 1805). Wilson relied heavily on Abbot for information about the bird life of the southeast coast, and the data were not always overtly credited to Abbot in Wilson's writings (Simpson, 1986).

Such is apparently the case with the Scarlet Ibis, for Wilson (1814) states in volume 8 of the *American Ornithology*: "This beautiful bird is found in most southern parts of Carolina;

also in Georgia and Florida." Subsequent editions of Wilson's *Ornithology* repeated the assertion, which was occasionally duplicated by later writers until the claim eventually disappeared from the ornithological literature by the end of the century. Abbot's British correspondent, John Latham, mentioned in volume IX of the *General History of Birds* (1824) that "a few (were) seen in the South of Carolina, and sometimes in Georgia," but it is not apparent whether he was paraphrasing Wilson or quoting directly from Abbot. Although Wilson might have obtained this information elsewhere, it seems most likely that his informant was Abbot, who crafted at least two watercolor renderings of the bird. Due to the absence of specimens and lack of detailed records, Wilson's claim that the Scarlet Ibis occurred in the "most southern parts of Carolina" should prompt consideration of admitting the species to the hypothetical list for South Carolina.

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