

Multiple White-faced Ibises (*Plegadis chihi*) Found at Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge, North Carolina

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After field work on 26 February 2013 at the east end of Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), Hyde County, NC, Winton stopped to view a mixed flock of approximately 40 ibises foraging in a flooded field approximately 50 yards from the side of the dirt road leading to Waupoppon Canal. About two-thirds of the flock were obviously White Ibises (*Eudocimus albus*), but unobstructed scope views of 12 of the dark birds revealed that not all were Glossy Ibises (*Plegadis falcinellus*). One individual displayed the field marks of an immature White-faced Ibis (*P. chihi*), including a ruby red eye, pinkish facial skin, and pink-red legs, all of which were lacking in the nearby Glossy Ibises (see Figure 1). In side-by-side



Figure 1. North Carolina's third record of White-faced Ibis (left) preens in a flooded field at the east end of Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge with two Glossy Ibises on 26 Feb 2013. Photo by R. Scott Winton.

comparison, this White-faced Ibis also appeared to be browner overall with more yellow and pink/purple iridescence in the body and folded flight feathers compared to the nearby Glossy Ibises, which were relatively blacker with more crimson and turquoise tones. Winton obtained multiple digiscoped photos of this bird and the Glossy Ibises with which it was associated.

This report heralded a slew of White-faced Ibis sightings from various parts of Mattamuskeet NWR over the following several weeks. Susan Campbell observed multiple birds in the main impoundment 4 (MI 4), MI 5 (also in the central part of the refuge), and in MI 9 (on the eastern side, not far from the original sighting) between 28 February and 10 April 2013, with as many as five White-Faced Ibises present simultaneously. Campbell captured three in the same photo frame on 26 March 2013 (see Figure 2). The eBird database contains accepted records from 10 additional distinct observers reporting 1, 2, or 3 White-faced Ibises during this time frame.



Figure 2. Multiple White-faced Ibises were found in various parts of the Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge from late February to early April 2013. This photo shows three individuals (back left, far right, right front) foraging in an impoundment with five Glossy Ibises on 26 March. Photo by Susan Campbell.

Conditions at Mattamuskeet NWR were particularly favorable for ibises and other wading birds during the winter of 2013. Higher than average rainfall gave way to spring drawdowns in the refuge impoundments, and as a result, there was good foraging habitat for wading birds in shallow, muddy areas.

Status of North Carolina records

The North Carolina Bird Records Committee (NCBRC) unanimously accepted collective reports of the White-faced Ibises seen at Mattamuskeet NWR in 2013 (Tove et al. 2014). Just two previous records of White-faced Ibis have been accepted by the NCBRC. The first was a bird seen and photographed in a ditch at South Nags Head from 1 July to 18 July 2002 (LeGrand 2005), and the second was a single-observer sight record from

Mattamuskeet NWR on 28 April 2011 (*Chat* 75:126, 76:2). An old sight report from 1973 (*American Birds* 31:979) was not accepted by the NCBRC because of a lack of documentation (NC Bird Records Committee 1990).

White-faced Ibis, the western counterpart to Glossy Ibis, was considered to be a subspecies (*P. falcinellus chihi*) until the two dark ibis species were split by the American Ornithologists Union in 1983 (Ryder and Manry, 1994). They can be difficult to distinguish in non-breeding condition, especially immatures. Further complicating identity is the possibility of hybrids, which have been well-documented in Oklahoma (Arterburn and Gryzbowski 2003).

Because of the identity challenge, it is widely assumed that White-faced Ibises are frequently overlooked. General comments on the *Birds of North Carolina: Status and Distribution* website (accessed Dec., 2013) describe the history of the species in North Carolina as “embarrassing.”

Distribution along the Atlantic Coast

White-faced Ibis has been reported much more frequently farther north along the Atlantic Coast, with a few dozen accepted eBird records from the Delmarva Peninsula to Portland, Maine. The relative scarcity of White-faced Ibis records in the Southeast (at the time of writing only a combined four records have been accepted by state bird records committees for North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia) could reflect a true pattern of vagrancy, but is more likely to be an artifact of lower observer effort and access to coastal birding sites relative to the mid-Atlantic and Northeast.

While Virginia has at least nine accepted records of White-faced Ibis (Rottenborn and Brinkley 2007), records are scarce along the Atlantic coast between northeastern North Carolina and Florida. Despite multiple reports over the years to the carolinabirds listserv and an accepted eBird record from Savannah National Wildlife Refuge, White-faced Ibis has yet to make an appearance on any list of South Carolina birds maintained by the South Carolina Bird Records Committee (SCBRC) (Carolina Bird Club website, accessed Mar., 2014). The SCBRC recently voted not to accept a blurry photograph suggestive of White-faced Ibis taken at Kiawah Island, SC on 12 April 2013 (Hill et al. 2014).

Georgia has two White-faced Ibis records, with a third recent observation of two birds pending acceptance by the Georgia Society of Ornithology records committee. The first was seen at the Bradley Unit of Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge, Stewart County, for a month in spring of 2002 (Beaton et al. 2003). Georgia’s second record was photographed at Little St. Simons Island in Glynn County on 24 April 2012 (Georgia Ornithological Society website, accessed Dec. 2013). Georgia’s third record, pending approval, was of two birds, an adult and an immature, photographed “in the southwest part of the state” in late October, 2013 (Frontiers of Field ID listserv archives, October 2013, week 4).

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