

SNAIL KITE

Volume 35

No. 2-3

Spring-Summer 2009

Snail Kite is published by the Florida Ornithological Society as an information exchange among persons interested in the conservation, research and enjoyment of birds in Florida. Notices or requests for information or assistance and news of interest should be sent to the editor: Tom Palmer, 1805 26th St. NW, Winter Haven FL 33901, W. (863)902-7535, Fax (863) 902-7809, H. (863) 907-4711, E-mail tom47@yahoo.com. Recent issues of the newsletter and other information are available on the FOS website www.fobirds.org.

Ivory-billed Woodpecker Hope, Uncertainty Remain

Somewhere in the Florida Panhandle, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker may persist, but better documentation will be required before scientists will be satisfied. That sums up a series of talks at the Spring FOS convention in Ruskin.

It has been four years since scientists announced the news that the ivory-billed woodpecker, the largest and rarest woodpecker in North America, may not be extinct after all.

So what's the latest, you may wonder.

The short answer is that some researchers have not backed off from their belief that a small population of these woodpeckers still exists but they still don't have irrefutable proof, which is the standard for science. As a result, other researchers are skeptical.

The FOS Spring Meeting brought together an impressive amount of information on the history of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, a survey of museum collections and a talk on the current research in Florida..

Although the original announcement came as the result of sightings in Arkansas, the most promising center of research now seems to focus on the floodplain of the Choctawhatchee River, which runs from the Alabama border down to the Gulf of Mexico through Holmes and Walton counties in the Florida Panhandle.

The leader of that research effort is Geoff Hill, an ornithology professor from Auburn University. The search came after a chance encounter with what Hill and two companions thought was an Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Their initial sighting occurred on May 27, 2005, not long after the national announcement from the Arkansas report.

The Arkansas announcement, which accompanied a paper and an image of a bird that was published in a major scientific journal, drew criticism because the image wasn't definitive (it could have been the related and more common Pileated Woodpecker, according to critics) and the accounts of the sightings raised questions about the credibility of some of the observers.

Followup field work along the Chocktawhatchee River produced several sightings, Hill said.

Hill said one of the obstacles to getting good photos is that the birds are extremely wary.

He said that's not surprising given the area where it's probably common for people in the woods to take potshots at anything they see when they're along the river and fish aren't biting.

Hill said until there's a good, identifiable image available for all to see, the doubts will continue.

If you'd like to know more about the Panhandle search, you can go to <http://tinyurl.com/fu64o> and see links on everything from the search itself to tips and warnings about undertaking a search.

Hill has published a book - "Ivorybill Hunters: The Search for Proof in a Flooded Wilderness" - that also provides details of the search so far.

The events that have occurred since the 2005 announcement of the Arkansas sightings have produced considerable discussion.

FOS President Jerome Jackson, the world's leading expert on the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, said the \$27.8 million that federal officials plan to spend by the end of next year to search for Ivory-billed Woodpeckers and to implement the species' recovery plan should be used to achieve the best conservation value.

The likelihood that Florida and not Arkansas may be the site where the Ivory-billed Woodpecker's continued existence is finally documented would not be surprising.

That's certainly what the source of the specimens of this species in museums around the world suggests, said Andrew Kratter, who is collection manager for the bird collection at the Florida Natural History Museum in Gainesville.

Most of the 413 Ivory-billed Woodpecker specimens that were ever collected and acquired by museums were collected in Florida and many of those whose origins are unknown were probably collected in Florida, too, he said.

Only four specimens were collected in Arkansas, Kratter said.

(Note: The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation has a Web page devoted to Ivory-billed Woodpeckers. Go to <http://tinyurl.com/lu3z73> for more information.)

Observing the Reddish Egret



The eye of the bird near a tidal lagoon is a wide burnished yellow with a black center and an unwavering gaze.

I can't help but stare at the bird. The bill is longer and has a greater area of black than it appears from a distance.

It is the Reddish Egret, an uncommon bird that has a loopy style of hunting aquatic prey. People sometimes describe it as drunken. It runs, flies short distances, sometimes with wings raised or with its neck stretched slightly to the side and its head tilted across its body.

From a distance, I've just watched the bird hunt for 35 minutes in an adjacent lagoon on Beer Can Island. The "island" is actually a peninsula at the northernmost tip of Longboat Key where my wife and I are spending our fourth winter.

Now the egret's right leg is raised and hidden in its body while it rests. I can hardly believe it but I've got a chance to see the Reddish Egret up close.

The egret has a gray body, a washed-out mauve neck and head, and a javelin-like black-and-pink bill that reminds me of the Good & Plenty candy box. In back of the egret the water is a pale, clear blue. It's like looking into eternity.

This compact 30-inch-tall bird was once on eternity's doorstep, having been hunted nearly to extinction for its elegant plumes in the early 20th century.

There are 2,000 pairs in the country, 400 of which are in Florida where it is strictly a coastal wetlands bird. Just seeing the Reddish Egret excites me.

I want to get as close to it as possible, to note every detail, to get to know the bird. I drop my water bottle and, fixing my eyes solely on the egret, take a first small step. I move from 35 feet to 30 feet away from the bird I don't know how close I can get. However I'll know if I come too close. The bird will fly. And that's what I don't want to happen. High in its nest in a nearby Australian pine tree a Great Blue Heron has its wings spread out to dry.

Stylish.

By contrast, the Reddish Egret's neck and head feathers, which appear long and unkempt, take on a dull golden hue as they dry.

A fish leaps from the water sending out ripples. Why not just send a text message "come and get me?" Having inched my way to less than 20 feet from the bird, the bird twitches its head.

The sun is warm and I'm thirsty. Slowly getting up and retrieving my water bottle I carefully resume my spot. The bird again twitches its head. The words "Don't scare it off," ring in my head.

Now at 15 feet I wonder where is this guy's tipping point? How close did the plume hunters come that nearly killed off this species? Or did they just fill the air with gunshot? The egret's throat is moving in and out, and then it stops. Some White Ibises flying over the mangroves have the bird's attention.

A bird, no matter how uncommon, doing nothing eventually becomes boring. It's boring. I'm tempted to leave but when will I ever get this chance again? Just then a breeze kicks up moving some of its feathers. Sitting in the sand, watching with the naked eye, I've got a view that most birders would love to have. Now I've inched my way to perhaps 10 feet from it.

How much farther can I go without scaring it?

"Leave, you've already gotten closer than you could have dreamed possible," says a silent voice in my head.

A tail-twitching White Ibis freezes me. It is fishing along the shoreline close to the egret. Will it approach the egret?

The Reddish Egret now slowly drops its raised leg to the sand. Checking me out, the ibis pokes its curved orange bill into the water as it feeds just a few feet from the egret, which is preening its breast.

The sun is baking me and I pull my outer shirt over my head. The spot where the egret stood is now empty! Getting up I walk over to where it stood which is marked by the bird's small footprints. I estimate that I was 12 to 13 feet from the egret when it flew.

Rebuking myself for scaring it, I see that the egret is just a short ways down the shoreline. In seconds the bird walks into the water, gently lifting off and slowly flying a short distance to the mangroves. There it looks around, takes off and disappears within the greenery.

The relative safety of the mangroves envelops eternity's bird. This is where its nest must be. Looking at my watch I've been here exactly 40 minutes. It was the best individual birding that I've ever done, requiring stealth and patience, the latter, which in the end, I didn't have enough of. By removing my shirt I probably annoyed the egret. I didn't want to scare the bird off but I also didn't want to leave.

Unconsciously I may have engineered a solution where I accidentally annoyed the egret, which may have been ready to leave anyway. Walking out to the beach where huge ravaged trees and the strong surf make for a rugged setting, the scene oddly feels tame.

Down the beach a Willet flies past me, landing in the wet sand holding a morsel in its bill. Ordinarily I'd be curious, but I've passed a threshold. Watching the egret that makes this elegant bird seem ordinary.

Walking home I still see the initial look of the Reddish Egret's unwavering eye and the thrill it brought. Indeed I'm surprised that given its history of near extinction, eternity's bird tolerated my proximity for such a long time.

I won't soon forget it.

--Michael Givant

Bird news

Through a partnership with Hendry-Glades Audubon, the South Florida Water Management District will offer to the public escorted birding tours at the South Florida Birding Trail Stormwater Treatment Area 5 (STA-5) south of Clewiston in eastern Hendry County.

Dates for the rest of 2009 are: June 20, July 11, Aug. 15, Sept. 19, Oct. 17, Nov. 14, Nov.28, Dec. 12 and Dec. 26

Go to <http://www.orgsites.com/fl/hgaudubon/> for details.

Florida's bird list continues to increase. The latest is a record for a Greater Sand-Plover at Huguenot Memorial Park in Jacksonville. The bird remained at the park for about two weeks, providing great views for a large number of birdwatchers from all over North America.

The most recent issue of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative is available at <http://www.nabci-us.org/aboutnabci/bulletin0609.pdf>

Requests For Assistance

This may be a little late for this season, but file it away for next summer. Breeding Bird Survey Route Runners are needed. The routes needed are:

51(Santa Rosa County), 58 (Suwannee County), 60 (Nassau County), 77 (Broward and Dade counties), 79 (Dade County), 176 Palm Beach and Broward counties) 183 (Monroe County , Keys)' 910 (Charlotte County) and 912 (Palm Beach County)

Contact Mike Delany 352 955 2081 x 114

Be on the alert for color-banded American Kestrels. The birds were banded in the Gainesville-Ocala area. Contact jessilbrown@GMAIL.COM regarding any recoveries.

Reports of American Kestrel nests south of 28.5 degrees latitude are sought through the end of June. Send details (nearest highway, landmark etc) to Karl E. Miller, Fish and Wildlife Research Institute, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 1105 SW Williston Road, Gainesville, FL 32601 karl.miller@myfwc.com

Announcements

David W. Johnson announces the publication of *Cedar Key. Birding In Paradise, Finding Birds Then and Now* (Illus. 100 p. Bookends Press, Gainesville, \$19.95 + \$3.00 S&H.). The book includes accounts of 18th century explorers, their birds (Ivory billed Woodpeckers, Carolina Parakeets) and contemporary sites for locating the region's diversity and abundance of its fabulous bird life. Order from the author (fordeboids@verizon.net).

Cornell University's Laboratory of Ornithology is sponsoring a contest to get people outdoors in urban areas to look for odd, funky places where birds nest. Let's think beyond flower pots here. Check out <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/celebration/challenge/funky-nests-in-funky-places> for the details.

Bill Pennewell, who has founded the Florida Bluebird Society, is looking for people to serve on the organization's board of directors. Contact him at billsbluebirds@yahoo.com if you'd like to help.

From The Editor

In case you haven't noticed, the look of Snail Kite has changed. That's because it now published exclusively on line, which will save printing and postage costs as well as a few mind-numbing evenings a year affixing labels and stamps. I've added some color, but haven't really come up with a new design yet. I'm interested in input and any technical help that might be out there to do something interesting with our logo in the flag (that's the thing at the top of the newsletter).

And, as always, I'm always on the lookout for news of anything bird-related from Florida or of interest to the Florida birding community. That includes information on current research, requests for assistance, features on neat birding sites, especially the ones that haven't been written about extensively, and conservation issues, which are certainly important in this state if we are to preserve what's left of our avian populations.

The new format will allow me to post more photos, including color photos, which weren't practical in the old format. I also have more space (within reason), so you can send me more stuff.

I'm easy to reach. Don't be shy.

--Tom Palmer

**Please submit material for the Fall 2009 issue of
Snail Kite by Sept. 15.**

Florida Ornithological Society Officers

President: Jerome A. Jackson, Florida Gulf Coast University, 10501 FGCU Blvd., Fort Myers FL 33965 Phone: (wk) 239-590-7193; (fax), 239-590-7200. Email: jjackson@fgcu.edu

Vice President: Elena Sachs

Secretary: Jim Cox, Tall Timbers Research Station, 13093 Henry Beadal Dr., Tallahassee FL 32312 Phone: (hm) 850-942-2489; (wk) 850-893-4153 Ext. 223; Email: jim@ttrs.org

Treasurer: Peter Merritt, 8558 S. Sharon St., Hobe Sound FL 33455, Phone: wk 772-221-4060; (cell) 772-485-8016; (fax) 772-546-2268. Email pmerritt@hspi.us

Editor, Florida Field Naturalist: Scott Robinson, Florida Museum of Natural History, P.O. Box 117800 Gainesville. FL 32611-7800 352-392- 1721 Ext. 509. Email: srobinson@flmnh.ufl.edu