

Glossy Ibises in the Everglades Park

by JOSEPH CURTIS MOORE

SOMEONE SEES a few glossy ibis, *Plegadis falcinellas*, almost every year in the Everglades National Park at one place or another, usually in flight, but we have come to regard the species as a rare or casual visitor. Back in the summer of 1945, when M. Barnie Parker was patrolling as an Audubon Society warden off what was then the commercial fishing village of Flamingo, he recorded in his log of August 10th that he had counted 38 glossy ibis going to roost on Catfish Key. When I was reading the borrowed log several years later, finding this exceptional record aroused my keen interest in the matter. As opportunity permitted in 1949 and 1951 I made several evening visits to Catfish Key. There the spectacle of scores of snowy and American egrets trooping in amid strings of hundreds of white ibis streaming in to roost, quite enchanted me and made the effort well worth the while, but there were no glossy ibis. Tentatively I laid Barnie's old record aside as probably an unusual occurrence, and gradually I gave up hope of seeing glossy ibis at Catfish Key myself.

It is far more than a myth that the rare glossy ibis is sometimes seen about the Anhinga Trail at Taylor Slough. Ranger-naturalist David Karkaker recorded it there five times during the winter of 1952-53. One of these records is of two individuals which astonishingly enough, fed in the wet glades and edges of the ponds there every day from February 11th through the 21st. Other written records of observations, one each by W. E. Dilley, Al Milotte, D. B. Beard, and the writer extend the range of time of occurrences of this bird here from late November to June first. This coincides very nicely with the usual extent of the annual dry season. As the dry season progresses the glades water levels are dropping and leaving vast areas dry, and food animals are presumed to be concentrating in deep sloughs and ponds, such as Taylor Slough. Other water birds of many kinds congregate here then, apparently to feed upon the crowded fish.

Nevertheless, over the years the glossy ibis has been rarely seen at this place. Arthur H. Howell had no report of it in his study of the birds of Paradise Key and surroundings in 1917, '18 and '19. We have seen it usually only as an individual in a flock of adult and immature white ibis coming in to roost in the slough at sunset.

Down farther into the park where the Ingraham Highway passes through the attractive *Paurotis* palm area, Louis A. Stimson recorded seeing glossy ibises on bird observation trips in 1939, 1940, and 1945, and I saw a flock of 13 or 14 overhead near there in 1950. These are one January, two April, and one May sightings, and the fact that these observations appear to be seasonal may be related to the excellence of the *Paurotis* palm area, also, as a feeding area for wading birds during the seasonal drying up of the Everglades.

Far out in the wilderness maze of the mangrove coast in 1951, park ranger M. Barnie Parker logged observations of single flocks of this ibis in flight over the Broad River Banks on January 25th and over the head of Rogers Creek on February 13th.

There is one other place in the park where this unusual wader has occasionally appeared. Seven miles south of the Tamiami Trail by a rough little administrative road is the Seven Mile Fire Tower where park ranger E. C. Winte and fire control aid J. T. Cooper have logged their observations of single glossy ibises twice in February of 1952 and their observations of pairs twice in February of 1953. Cooper logged a lone glossy ibis flying past the fire tower on March 12, 1952, and Winte recorded a single one flying over the park area April 28, 1950, seen from the Tamiami Trail. It is interesting that all of these above recorded glossy ibis observations, for Taylor Slough, the *Paurotis* palm area, the mangrove labyrinth of waterways, and the Seven Mile Tower and Tamiami Trail area were made between November and June. Twice as many of these were made in February as any other month.

It is probably well-known to south Florida naturalists that small numbers of glossy ibises roost on midsummer nights in the Ten Thousand Islands among the many thousands of white ibises and herons on Duck Rock. W. E. Dilley recorded seeing 80 leave that famous roost at dawn on a trip up there August 6, 1948, and I saw five come in at sundown there on July 20, 1949.

After having accepted scarcity of glossy ibises as one of the characteristics of the park, to me the discovery deep down in the park of what may prove to be a site to which numbers of this bird come regularly at a given season, is a most delightful find. Few people realize how much mystery still enshrouds the habits even of large conspicuous birds in the vast wilderness of the park. The rarely visited place to which I found glossy ibises flocking was Catfish Key, exactly where Bernie Parker had seen and recorded them seven years before. My earlier evening visits to this key had been at the wrong time of year to see glossy ibises come in to roost.

This oblong islet, called Catfish Key, is only about 200 yards wide by 275 yards long, and lies $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles south of Flamingo in Florida Bay. About it on three sides extends a wide, shallow bank which prevents direct approach by boat from the mainland any closer than a mile, excepting upon the height of the tide. As a part of a general survey of water bird roosts and rookeries in the park, I planned a series of evening visits to Catfish Key in the summer of 1952. The recent gravelling of the Ingraham Highway from Snake Bight Road to Coot Bay was an immeasurable help to summer access to this place. An airboat made approach to the key an easy matter, and I selected nights when the moon approached full to light my return. On May 9th I began, always with assistance, to make evening counts, approximately monthly, of the water birds coming in to roost at Catfish Key. It was not until the count of July 1st, when accompanied by park naturalist W. E. Dilley and Roswell Bushnell of DeLand, that I saw any glossy ibises come in to roost. We counted 201 of these rare creatures. More than this may have come in, for we stopped our count when it became too dark to be sure of distinguishing the several kinds of birds. Some glossies were mixed in with flocks of adult and immature white ibises, others flew in similar formations which contained glossy ibises only. At least one of the flocks purely of glossies numbered as high as thirty-five birds. They came from the mainland, and our records show that they began coming in at the start of the last hour during which there was light enough to count.

On August 8th Louis A. and Dorothy Stimson assisted me to make the evening count at Catfish Key. To our astonishment and delight glossy ibises continued to arrive until we ran up a count of 518. At least one flock which contained only glossies numbered 100 birds. This time, also, they

started coming in at the beginning of the last hour of light enough to count. Ibises did continue to come in after it was too dark to distinguish the two kinds, but at a very reduced rate and perhaps numbering several hundred at the most.

On the nights of September 2nd and 3rd when I visited Catfish Key, there were no glossy ibis seen to come into the key. On the count of September 30th, by which time general water bird use of this summer roost was greatly reduced, the Stimsons and I again found no glossy ibis. So, it now appears that numbers of glossy ibis may come regularly in mid-summer to feed somewhere on the Cape Sable area and to roost at night with many other wading birds on Catfish Key. This may reveal roughly the extent of glossy ibis use of summer roosts in the Park, or like *Barnie Parker's* record of seven years ago, it may indicate the proper way to discover more.