

The Luck of the Ibis

A new species record for Beaverhill Lake

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How much luck does one have when the sighting of a secretive American Bittern is topped by another, even more exciting species? On May 11, 1999 the arrival of two White-faced Ibis eclipsed all other bird observations at Beaverhill Lake.



This bird species has not been recorded at the lake before. The first record of a white-faced ibis in Alberta was 1941 near Rosebud (approximately 25 km south-west of Drumheller)(Goossen et al. 1995). Between 1941 and 1992 these southern visitors were observed over 90 times. Most of the accounts in Alberta come from an area between Calgary and the extreme south-east corner of the province. A significant portion of the sightings have occurred close to the Alberta-Montana border, around Pakowki Lake. In Alberta, there has not been a recorded sighting since 1992, and there has never been a sighting north of Rosebud. The historical sighting records as tabulated by Roy Fairweather of Tofield, Alberta indicate no previous record. The official bird checklist for Beaverhill Lake does not even list the species as a hypothetical. But there they were, flying before our eyes.

What started as the pair of Double-crested Cormorants seen moments earlier quickly transformed into shapes never seen at Beaverhill Lake before. Two relatively large dark birds with shallow wing beats approached, flying northward from Lister Lake towards the marshes of the south east corner of Beaverhill Lake. It was when the birds were flying over the weir and their profiles could be seen did we realize exactly what we were witnessing. The black of a cormorant turned into reds, greens and purples. The long slender decurved bills became evident, along with long pink legs. There could only be one possibility but it was still hard to believe our eyes.

We watched with great relief as the birds banked west and decided to land on the mud flats near the south east shore of the lake. At that moment, an American Bittern flew by. Charles, never having seen a bittern before stared in amazement and was seemingly overwhelmed with observing the two species at once. However, when we had to choose between which species to pursue, the choice was an easy one.

As we cautiously approached with Charles whispering "Don't take off, don't take off" with every step, the birds appeared to be oblivious to the thrill of the situation. The visitors simply went about their business gorging on the ample invertebrates provided by the mud flats. With each step the ibises probed their long downwardly curved bill all the way to the hilt, reaching for prey unavailable to all other waders feeding in the same area. Even the godwits and avocets could not reach to equal depths.

A change in the weather could be heard approaching from the north. The sound of the wind brushing against the surface of the water and the flutter of new leaves in the trees grew louder and louder as a wind approached. When the wind arrived, the ibises flew from the unprotected mud flats to the cover of last years growth of cattails. In the marsh just north of the weir the pair of ibises could feed in the shelter of old vegetation.

The old cattails also provided cover for the observers, allowing us to approach even closer than before. We settled in behind a wall of tall grass where we were able to obtain a fantastic look at these birds through a spotting scope. It was at that moment when the ibises' colours and shapes became more apparent. Heron like bodies adorned with rich velvet-like colours. Legs painted in pink hues that could only be rivalled by flamingos. The same pinks on the face surrounded by a white border providing an image as if the birds were wearing a super-hero-esque mask. Judging by the size difference and the relatively muted colours of the smaller ibis, it is possible that one is male and the other female. A possible breeding pair? One can only hope.



Our proximity to the ibises was close enough to hear some vocalizations of the ibises. The sounds they made were a cross between a quack and an oink. These sounds were made only when the birds seemed agitated by our presence, just before leaping to flight.

Imagine the setting: Yellow-headed and Red-winged Blackbirds, Marsh Wrens and a Sora in the background; White-faced Ibis at center stage; Willets, Pectoral and Least Sandpipers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Dunlins and Long-billed Dowitchers and at your feet; and American White Pelicans, a Black-crowned Night-heron and a Great Blue Heron flying over head. It was the kind of experience that is etched into one's mind forever.

Unfortunately the show had to end, but at least it ended with a great finale. Even these ibises had some tolerance level, and the moment we took one step too close they took to the sky. When they rose above the reeds, they were bathed in the rich golden rays of the setting sun. It was at this moment, in front of a backdrop of the dark gray clouds of an oncoming storm did we see their true colours. The reds turned into liquid bronze, the greens exploded into a spectrum of iridescence and they seemed to look at us with fiery red eyes. We then saw that they had colours that could make most bird species blush in envy.

As if to taunt us, they did not fly far into the distance, but only deeper into the marsh. However, we decided that such a display would be a fitting end to the nights viewing and decided not to follow. It was also hope that the birds would not be chased away so that other bird lovers could share such an experience.

As we packed up the scope and started heading back to the observatory, the shorebirds at our feet exploded into flight. It was not because of our footfalls the shorebirds scattered, but because of a low flying Peregrine Falcon that disappeared as fast as it appeared. Just a reminder that local birds can command awe as well.

Goossen, J.P., D.M. Ealey, H. Judge and D.C. Duncan. 1995. Distribution and Breeding Status of the White-faced Ibis, *Plegadis chihi* in Canada. *The Canadian Field Naturalist* 109: 391-402.