FIELD IDENTIFICATION OF WHITE-FACED AND GLOSSY IBISES

By H. Douglas Pratt

The White-faced Ibis (*Plegadis chihi*), of western North America and southern South America, and the Glossy Ibis (*P. falcinellus*), of eastern North America and the Old World, meet only in southern Louisiana. Although Palmer (1962) considered them conspecific, the two apparently exist in sympatry and are therefore good species. Glossy Ibises have bred in the Mississippi delta region for some time (Lowery, 1974) and lately have spread westward widening their zone of overlap with the White-faced Ibis. Holt's (1933) record of Glossy Ibises breeding in Cameron Parish is almost surely an error, since not a single individual of that species was seen there between the time of his observations and the 1970's. In 1973, I obtained the first recent evidence that Glossy Ibises may breed in southwestern Louisiana (Imhof, 1973). Since that time the species has been observed there several times in spring (Hamilton, 1974, Imhof, 1974) and even in winter (Hamilton, 1975). Although sightings in Texas have been reported, the Glossy Ibis is still considered to be of hypothetical occurrence there (Oberholser, 1974). Birders in southeastern Texas should be on the alert for this species since the most westerly Louisiana sightings occurred within two miles of the state line in Cameron Parish. When good documentary photographs or a specimen are obtained, the bird can be added to the Texas list.

The study of the range extension of the Glossy Ibis is complicated by the difficulty of distinguishing the two species in the field, as well as by the needle-in-a-haystack nature of the search. Glossy Ibises are by no means common in Louisiana, even in the Mississippi delta, where they have occurred for years, being outnumbered ten to one by White-faced Ibises (Imhof, 1971). In Cameron Parish, only a sprinkling of Glossies can be found among the thousands of White-faces. A further complication is that dark ibises vary seasonally in the characters most useful in identifying the species. Unfortunately, many questions remain to be answered about these seasonal changes. The birder must be cautious when attempting to identify nonbreeding birds. The following descriptions and accompanying color plate should enable birders to identify more dark ibises than in the past, but one should not expect to identify all individuals, even when well seen. The capitalized color names used in this account are taken from Smithe's (1975) color guide.

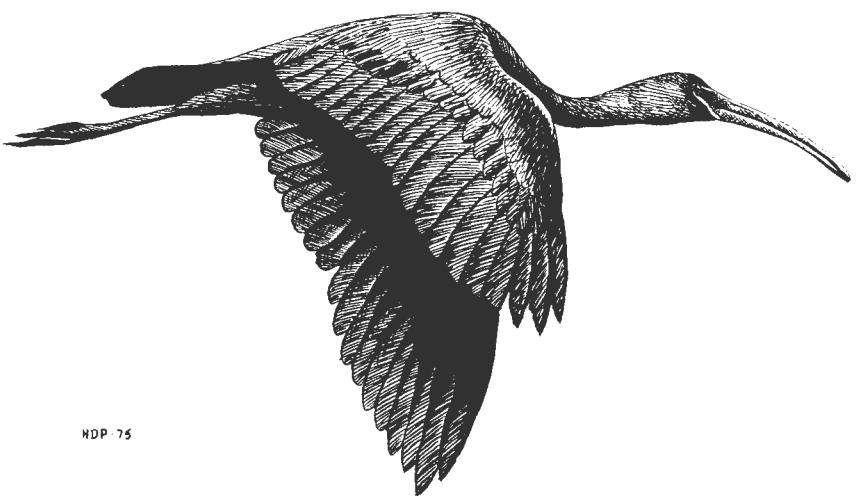
Both species of *Plegadis* are dark Chestnut as adults, with beautiful metallic green and purple reflections, especially dorsally. Immatures and winter adults lack the overall Chestnut coloration. Such birds are Dusky

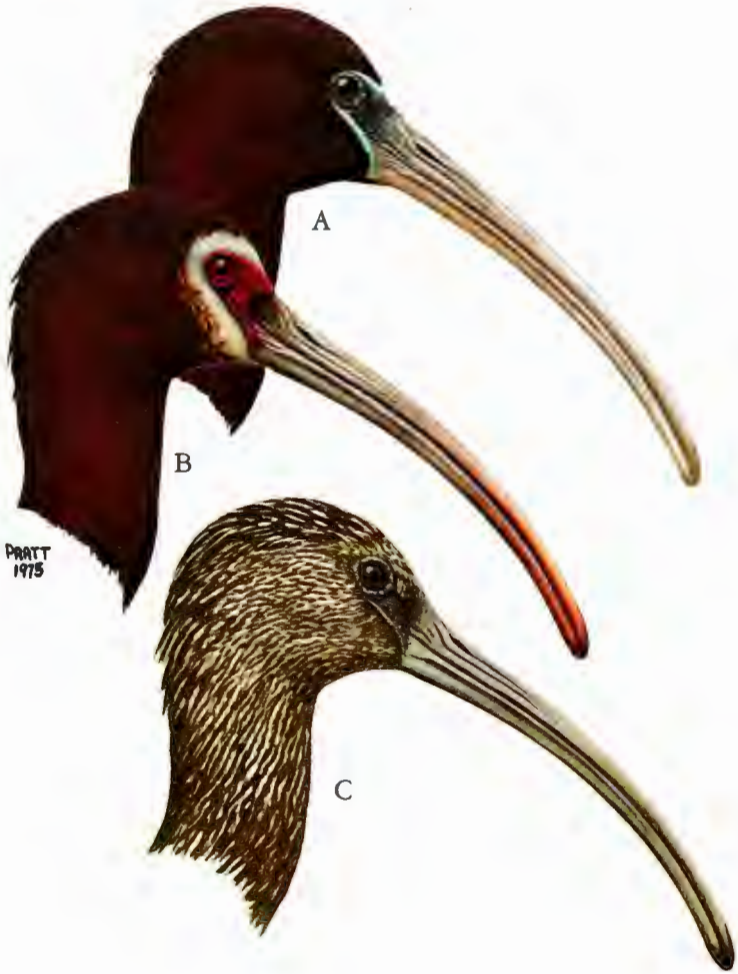
*The second in a series of comprehensive field identification articles under the general editorship of Will Russell.

Brown with metallic green iridescence dorsally, and with the head and neck finely streaked with white. No consistently workable means has yet been found for distinguishing adults from first-winter birds in the field, although many winter adults retain some Chestnut feathers at the bend of the wing (Belknap, 1957). Whether all winter adults exhibit these feathers is not known. Palmer (1962) claims that juvenal White-faces are lighter above than juvenal Glossy Ibises, but the difference is not apparent to me. Except for the white feathers bordering the facial skin of the White-faced Ibis, the breeding plumages of the two species appear identical. The white face is acquired last in the sequence of changes leading to the breeding plumage and in some individuals is quite narrow and difficult to see. Thus the field observer must rely on other characters, particularly the colors of the facial skin, bill, and iris to identify dark ibises during most of the year.

The facial skin of the White-faced Ibis in breeding condition is a bright Carmine. The color is less intense before and after the nesting season and fades to dark Smoke Gray in the winter. The facial skin never shows a pale border in this species. The bill is usually Olive-gray but at the height of the breeding season it becomes Cream Color distally, with a suffusion of Carmine. The eyes are blood red (between Carmine and Geranium) in adults throughout the year. I do not know whether all first-winter White-faced Ibises have red eyes, although Belknap (1957) states that all specimens of this species he collected had them. I have seen winter ibises that I felt certain were White-faces, but which did not seem to have blood red irides. Perhaps the color is less intense in winter birds. At any rate, the iris color is always difficult to see.

The Glossy Ibis possesses Plumbeous facial skin margined above and below with pale Sky Blue. This margin is broken behind the eye and thus





HEADS OF DARK IBISES

A. Glossy Ibis breeding.

B. White-faced Ibis breeding.
Many individuals show less white.

C. Glossy Ibis immature and winter adult.
Same stage in White-face is similar but
with red iris in adult and some immatures.

does not completely encircle the facial skin. The pale border of the facial skin could be confused with the white feathers bordering the face of the White-faced Ibis. In winter, the blue border fades, but some individuals retain traces of it all year. Birds in transition may show only that portion of the border above the eye. The bill is Olive-gray throughout its length, with a Vinaceous tinge at the height of the breeding season. The eye color is Dark Grayish Brown, appearing essentially black at a distance.

The legs and feet of both species are Olive-gray for much of the year, but during the breeding season those of the White-faced Ibis become bright Carmine throughout, while those of the Glossy become Carmine about the ankle joint only, at least in some individuals. Immatures show no differences in leg color.

Obviously, not all dark ibises seen will be identifiable to species, particularly in the winter. Iris color may be diagnostic throughout the year, but I would never "call" a winter Glossy on that basis alone. If one sees a red iris, the bird is surely a White-face, but nothing is proven if no such iris is visible. I have seen many a bird that seemed to have dark eyes until, even after careful observation with a spotting scope, the individual in question held its head at just the right angle, revealing a red iris after all. Ibises begin to develop their breeding dress in late January or February and from then, at least until August, most can be identified by facial skin coloration. At considerable distance, the facial features of the White-faced Ibis make it look pink-faced and quite unlike the gestalt of the Glossy Ibis. Even so, most birds seen far away or flying overhead in long V formations must simply be called *Plegadis.*

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