NOTES

Florida Field Naturalist 38(2):68-70, 2010.

WHITE IBIS (*Eudocimus albus*) NESTING IN THE BAHAMAS

JAMES A. KUSHLAN
PO Box 2008, Key Biscayne, Florida 33149

E-mail: Jkushlan@earthlink.net

The nesting range of the White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*) is known to encompass the southern coasts of North, Central and South America, from Baja California to northwestern Peru and from Virginia to French Guiana (AOU 1998). Within this range, it is particularly widespread and locally abundant in the southeastern United States, where it has expanded its range northward to North Carolina and Virginia within the past half century (Kushlan and Bildstein 1992). In southern Florida, it was historically the most abundant wading bird and, with the exception of the Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*), remains so today (Kushlan and Bildstein 1992, Stevenson and Anderson 1994). In the Caribbean, it nests on Cuba, Jamaica, and Hispaniola in the Greater Antilles but is considered to be accidental, occasional, or a non-breeding resident elsewhere in the region (Raffaele et al. 1998). In The Bahamas, it has been considered to be a non-breeding resident by Raffaele et al. (1998) and a winter resident by White (1998). Previous to the inventory reported on in this paper, it has not been known to nest in The Bahamas. Our initial nesting record was noted in Hallett (2006). In this paper, I document the nesting range expansion of the White Ibis into The Bahamas, describing the first and second known instances of nesting in that country.

Observations were made as part of an ongoing program inventorying the seabirds and other waterbirds in the northern Bahamas (2002-2010). The methods and extent of coverage are described in detail in Kushlan and Steinkamp (2007). Generally, a shallow-draft boat was used to approach shorelines closely, with surveys continuing on land when indicated. Species were determined and the numbers of birds and nests were counted. An airplane also was used to help locate colonies in the Berry Islands in 2002, but aerial counts were not included in the data set. Overall, the study area included Grand Bahama, and the Abaco, Berry, and Bimini island chains. Due to the extensiveness of the area, the inventory covered different areas of the northern Bahamas in different years. Observations were concentrated in June, but overall extended from April to July.

White Ibis were found nesting in two locations, North Bimini and east of Grand Bahama. On North Bimini, ibises nested on a small island within Bimini lagoon, generally named Sandy Cay on charts (25°43.634' N, 79°17.764' W). It is a small mangrove-covered patch immediately across the channel from Alice Town. White Ibis nests were first discovered on 26 June 2005, when12 nests were counted (Fig. 1). Nesting was confirmed again in June 2008 without a nest count, and on 19 June 2009 with the nest count having increased to 28. Near east Grand Bahama, ibises nested on a small island called Brush Cay (26°31.262' N, 77°48.608' W). These were found on 20 June 2009. Ibises were not observed to be nesting at this site on a previous survey in June 2005. In June 2002, young of the year White Ibis were observed on an aerial survey in the Berry Islands on Frazer Hog Cay (Chubb Cay). No nesting site was found on subsequent ground search of this and nearby islands.

Figure 1. Nest and eggs of White Ibis, Bimini Bahamas, June 2005, the first record of the species nesting in The Bahamas.

These observations demonstrate that the status of the White Ibis in The Bahamas is now that of a permanent resident nesting species. Although it nests in small numbers at present, the documentation of the second colony off Grand Bahama along with an increased number of nests at Bimini suggest that it is slowly consolidating its colonization of The Bahamas and expanding its nesting range there. That there are now two nesting locations known suggests the importance of further documentation of the occurrence of the White Ibis in The Bahamas, especially in late spring and summer, and the importance of investigating leads to its nesting elsewhere.

The White Ibis is abundant in nearby southern Florida and over the past decades has increased its presence in intensely developed urban areas along the east coast, immediately across the Gulf Stream from The Bahamas. Both Bahamian nesting sites are in the western Bahamas, Bimini sitting only 87 km and the Grand Bahama site only132 km from southern Florida. Certainly White Ibises in southern Florida seem the most likely source population. The White Ibis is an eruptive, semi-nomadic species known to move its colony sites from year to year (Kushlan and Bildstein 1992). Its tendency to wander, its habit of shifting nesting sites, its ability to live in a human-dominated landscape, and its presence in The Bahamas as a winter resident all may have predisposed it to colonize The Bahamas as a nesting species.

The two known colony sites are tiny, a small fraction of a hectare each, yet are not unimportant from a national and regional conservation perspective. In addition to White Ibis, Reddish Egrets (*Egretta rufescens*) nest at both sites. Brush Cay is the only known nesting site for Brown Pelicans (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) in the northern Bahamas (Kushlan and Steinkamp 2007) and also contained a high (for the region) number

of Tricolored Heron nests—18 in 2005, 21 in 2009. Whereas the Brush Cay site is difficult to access due to the shallowness of the surrounding water, the Bimini site is easily accessible to small boats, kayaks, jet skis, and wading, and has hundreds of boats passing near to it each day. Although the birds in the colony are clearly well habituated to the nonintrusive presence of people nearby, intrusion into the colony itself is disruptive. The resident and seasonal human population of Bimini is expanding along with on-going development, and with it the numbers of small boats and kayaks. As a result, the risk of inadvertent intrusion into the colony increases. It would be relatively straightforward to post the site with information to discourage entering and so protect its value as a nesting colony. As a conspicuous element in Bimini harbor, the Sandy Cay colony provides an environmental education opportunity through explanative signage and perhaps through engaging local environmentalists in monitoring its composition and condition on a continuing basis.

Acknowledgments

I thank those who participated in the census of White Ibises in the western Bahamas, Ross Exler, Louis Harts, Kirsten Hines, William Hume, Philip Kushlan, and Bruce Purdy. I thank David Lee for advice on this paper.

Literature Cited

AOU [American Ornithologists' Union]. 1998. Check-list of North American Birds, 7th ed. American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.

Hallett, B. 2006. Birds of the Bahamas and Turks and Caicos Islands. MacMillan Caribbean, Oxford, United Kingdom.

Kushlan, J. A., and K. L. Bildstein. 1992. White Ibis. *In* The Birds of North America, No. 9 (A. Poole, P. Stettenheim, and F. Gill, Eds.). The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.

Kushlan, J. A., and M. J. Steinkamp. 2007. Seabird nesting and conservation in the northern Bahamas. Waterbirds 30:613-623.

Raffaele, H., J. Wiley, O. Garrido, A. Keith, and J. Raffaele. 1998. A Guide to the Birds of the West Indies. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey.

Stevenson, H. M., and B. H. Anderson. 1994. The Birdlife of Florida. University Press of Florida, Gainesville.

White, A. W. 1998. A Birder's Guide to the Bahama Islands (Including Turks and Caicos). American Birding Association, Colorado Springs, Colorado.