

ROSEATE SPOONBILL NESTING IN TAMPA BAY, FLORIDA

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The last known nesting of Roseate Spoonbills (*Ajaia ajaja*) in the Tampa Bay area was in 1912, when P.J. Pacetti reported 85 nesting on Indian Key Reservation (Howell 1932). This was the only definite nesting record for Tampa Bay and marks the northern breeding limit of the Roseate Spoonbill on the west coast of Florida (Allen 1942). During the 1900's Florida breeding was restricted to Florida Bay, except for a few sporadic nestings on the mainland. Although spoonbill breeding was limited, many immature birds traditionally arrived along the Florida gulf coast in spring and departed the region in fall (Allen 1942).

In the past 10 years, counts of Roseate Spoonbills at National Audubon Sanctuaries along the eastern shoreline of Hillsborough Bay (northeastern portion of Tampa Bay) show that the non-breeding population fluctuates between a few to 300 birds during spring through fall (Audubon Warden Reports, unpublished). During 1966-1974, first sightings of spoonbills at Bird Island (also known as Alafia Spoil Banks), a major heronry at the mouth of the Alafia River in Hillsborough Bay, indicate they normally arrive in the last week of March. In 1975, spoonbills arrived at the colony during the third week of February, approximately one month earlier than usual. Only in 1966 were spoonbills sighted at the island in February.

On 28 February 1975, several of the 12 spoonbills present had brighter plumage than others in the flock. These brighter birds partially resembled the fourth postnatal plumage described by Allen (1942) and lacked certain features of the definitive alternate plumage (Palmer 1962) including the magenta ruby patch of recurved feathers on the breast, the strong wash of buffy yellow where the bend of the wing touches the side of the breast and the black on the dorsal portion of the neck. In previous years the spoonbills roosting at Bird Island and Green Key, an island located 3 km south of Bird Island, were in the second or third postnatal plumage (Allen 1942).

On 28 April 1975, Joseph Harris and I found a Roseate Spoonbill nest in the Bird Island colony. The nest, approximately 3 m above the ground in a Black Mangrove (*Avicennia germinans*), contained 3 young about one week old. On the following day, Helen Cruickshank photographed the nest, young and parents. She counted 6 additional nests in the vicinity of the first nest. Her photographs confirm that the nesting spoonbills were not in normal breeding plumage, but rather the sub-adult plumage described above.

During April and May spoonbills entered the colony at various locations other than the vicinity of the known nests. Counts of the spoonbill flock (including immature plumaged birds presumably too young to be nesting) during this period remained constant at about 40 individuals. Based on these observations, perhaps as many as 15 pairs of Roseate Spoonbills attempted to nest at Bird Island in 1975. Seven nests were actually observed.

On 8 May, the nest found 28 April held only 2 young. On 26 May I sighted 3 juvenile spoonbills (white plumage and heads covered with down) in the mangrove canopy near the previously discovered nests. Occasionally in June and July I observed young birds with down on their heads and white body plumage feeding with older birds on the mudflats surrounding the island; hence I assume that some of the nesting attempts were successful. I am uncertain of the number of young that fledged from the colony, since I did not disturb the nests to gather those data. On 21 July I counted over 50 spoonbills at Bird Island; however this increase in flock size could have been due to increases in the non-breeding population which reaches its peak in summer. At Green Key a non-breeding flock of spoonbills (fluctuating between 25 to 75 individuals) roosted during the spring, summer and fall of 1975. The amount of intermingling between the two groups is unknown, but birds were observed in flight between the two islands.

Paul et al. (1975) reported that Reddish Egrets (*Dichromanassa rufescens*) had returned to Tampa Bay in 1974 as a nesting species. Reddish Egrets again nested at Bird Island in 1975 and apparently the nesting population or the nesting success increased over the previous year. On 23 May 1975, of 13 Reddish Egrets observed at the island, at least 7 were recently fledged birds.

It is interesting to note that the Roseate Spoonbill and Reddish Egret suffered major population decreases in Florida during the late 1800's (Bent 1926; Allen 1942). For most of the current century both of these species have been limited to extreme south Florida for breeding. It is encouraging that within one year of each other they both extended their breeding range northward in Florida to what was perhaps their former limit.

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LITERATURE CITED

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