

SCARLET IBIS SIGHTING IN COFFEE COUNTY, GEORGIA

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On 13 March 2001, I was informed of a large red bird seen in a permanent pasture for the previous 10 days. It was described as a Scarlet Ibis (*Eudocimus ruber*) among egrets that had gathered around a pond located in the middle of the pasture. This was the third instance of people reporting large, red wading birds to me in recent years. I was determined to confirm this report.

When I arrived at the home of Freddie Lott, 1.7 km west of Huffer, Coffee County, Georgia, from approximately 250 m away I could see a Scarlet Ibis feeding in shallow water in the upper end of the pond with White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*). I counted 354 White Ibis, including two juveniles, and one Scarlet Ibis; most were feeding in the pasture. The Scarlet Ibis was seen raising its black-tipped wings as if to threaten birds that got too close to its feeding area.

I contacted Milton Hopkins of Osierfield, Georgia, to corroborate this rare bird. At mid-afternoon, Hopkins and I returned to the location where the Ibis had been feeding and saw the Scarlet Ibis in the pasture resting among the White Ibis. When we left the location by late afternoon, after taking several photographs from a distance of approximately 115 m, the birds flushed and the Scarlet Ibis exited the pasture toward Big Branch Creek in a westerly direction. A follow-up telephone call to Lott on 16 March revealed that the Scarlet Ibis and most of the White Ibis had not been seen since our 13 March sighting.

A search for previous reports of Scarlet Ibis sightings in Georgia produced a very limited history for this species. John Abbot (Rogers-Price 1997) included a painting of a Scarlet Ibis in his book on the birds of Georgia (1800-1810). Will and Maurice Thompson (Thompson 1915) recorded a Scarlet Ibis near the Okefenokee Swamp in July 1866. Will Thompson recorded this brief note as they exited the

swamp: "Thousands of wood ibis and snowy egrets rose ahead of us and many were the adventures we had with them, and twice we saw, standing on mud banks of the river, groups of scarlet ibis that looked like clumps of giant blossoms against the green background of the shore." Burleigh (1958) included the Scarlet Ibis on a hypothetical list of the birds of Georgia, based on Abbot's painting. Palmer (1962) recorded the bird as a straggler in Florida, Louisiana, and Texas, but failed to note records from Georgia in the distribution. Cypert (1971) noted that several Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge employees reported a Scarlet Ibis, and took color photographs of the bird in April 1971, in Chase Prairie. Haney et al. (1986) listed the Scarlet Ibis' wild status as questionable, but noted Cypert's article reporting Ed Yaw's and others' sighting of a single bird in the Okefenokee Swamp in April 1971. Revisions to the Regular Georgia Species List (1998) did not change the status of the bird. The comprehensive report by Hancock et al. (1992) dealt with the Scarlet Ibis' distribution and brought into clearer focus, the taxonomic difficulties between the White and Scarlet Ibis. While Nineteenth Century records of the Scarlet Ibis in Georgia may represent indigenous populations, the origin of the current sighting is not clear. Some South American birds were introduced into southern Florida during the early 1950s (Greene 1966). A possible explanation for this bird's presence in Georgia is that it may have escaped from a zoo. It is also possible that it is a natural, wild migrant. No band was seen on either of its legs, and the bird was a bright red color, not pink or faded as is often observed in captive birds. Hancock et al. (1992) noted its wide ranging dispersal and that fully scarlet birds nest in Florida. Hence, it is possible that this sighting of a Scarlet Ibis was of a wild bird.

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