ROSEATE SPOONBILL BREEDING IN CAMDEN COUNTY: A FIRST STATE NESTING RECORD FOR GEORGIA

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Introduction

We report the northernmost breeding record of Roseate Spoonbill (*Platalea ajaja*) on the Atlantic Coast of the U.S. Nesting activity has been suspected in Georgia for at least 5 years, but was first confirmed in June 2011 at a large wading bird colony in St. Marys, Camden County, Georgia. Prior to this record, the furthest northern breeding record for Roseate Spoonbill was in St. Augustine, St. John's County, Florida, approximately 100 km to the south. This record for Georgia continues a trend of northward expansion of Roseate Spoonbill post-breeding dispersal and breeding ranges.

Prior to the plume-hunting era of the mid to late 1800s, the eastern population of Roseate Spoonbill was more abundant and widespread than it is today (Dumas 2000), breeding across much of south Florida. Direct persecution and collateral disturbance by egret plume hunters led to a significant range contraction between 1850 and the 1890s (Allen 1942), limiting the eastern population of Roseate Spoonbills to a few sites in Florida Bay by the 1940s. A low of 15 nesting pairs were documented in 1936 (Powell et al. 1989). By the late 1960s, Roseate Spoonbills began to expand out of Florida Bay, slowly reclaiming some of the territory they had lost. By 1975, breeding resumed in Tampa Bay (Dunstan 1976), and by the late 1970s breeding numbers in Florida had increased dramatically to 2400 pairs. By 1987, breeding was again documented

on the Atlantic Coast (absent since 1874) at Kennedy Space Center (Smith and Breininger 1988, 1995). Starting around the year 2000, Roseate Spoonbills were observed roosting at the St. Augustine Alligator Farm Zoological Park in northeast Florida. Nesting was first documented at the alligator farm in 2010 (Gen Anderson, pers. comm.).

Nesting Activity in Georgia

By 2005, the presence of Roseate Spoonbills at several Georgia rookeries during the breeding season increased the speculation that they were, or would soon be, nesting in the state. In 2007, adults were seen regularly on Egg Island, Little St. Simons Island, Jekyll Island, and in St. Marys. In early April 2010, 6 adult spoonbills were seen at a wading bird colony on Jekyll Island. One pair was seen carrying sticks, but no further evidence of nesting emerged (Lydia Thompson, pers. comm.).

A minimum of 22 spoonbills were observed in the Durango Wood Stork (aka Gilman colony) colony in St. Marys, Georgia, during 2010, some in full breeding plumage. The Durango colony inhabits a 16-acre deep water pond with 4 vegetated islands. Island vegetation includes red maple (*Acer rubrum*), Chinese tallow tree (*Sapium sebifera*), willow (*Salix* spp), and Sabal Palm (*Sabal palmetto*).

These islands have long been important nesting sites for a wide range of waterbirds. Confirmed breeding birds at this site include Wood Stork (*Mycteria americana*), Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*), Anhinga (*Anhinga anhinga*), Great Egret (*Ardea alba*), Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*), Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*), Tricolored Heron (*Egretta tricolor*), Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*), Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*), Black-crowned Night-heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*), White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*), and Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*). In some years there are thousands of wading birds nesting in the colony.

On 13 April 2011, 8 adult Roseate Spoonbills were seen in the Durango colony, though no direct evidence of nesting was noted. On 11 May, a Roseate Spoonbill was observed carrying nesting material. An adult pair on an apparent nest platform was first noticed on 17 May, and nesting was confirmed on 26 June. The site was visited by boat on 28 June at which time 3 chicks were documented and photographed on the nest (Fig. 1). The chicks were estimated to be 2 weeks old. The nest was a loose stick assemblage approximately 3 m above ground in a small red maple.

A subsequent visit to the site on 5 August 2011 revealed the remains (i.e., feathers and a humerus) of one chick below the nest. A total of 7 hatch-year Roseate Spoonbills were seen foraging along the edge of the island near where the nest was located. This suggests the possibility of additional undetected nesting activity, though dispersal from another colony site could not be ruled out.

This nest is the first confirmed record of nesting Roseate Spoonbills in the state of Georgia, and represents the northern-most nesting for this species on the Atlantic Coast. Another pair of Roseate Spoonbills was observed in the Wood Stork colony at Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge in July 2011, approximately 100 km north of the Durango colony, but nesting was not confirmed.

Discussion

As recently as the 1950s, the Roseate Spoonbill was considered an extremely rare visitor to Georgia, with only one confirmed record dating to the summer of 1934 (Burleigh 1958). Since then, numbers and dates of observations have increased in Georgia (Beaton et al. 2003). South Carolina has also documented a growing number of spoonbills in mid to late summer (Felicia Sanders, pers. comm.). The summer of 2009 provided an unprecedented example of spoonbills dispersing well beyond their breeding range. Observers in Delaware, Indiana, and Ontario all documented first records of the species that year (Brinkley 2009). More than 100 were documented roosting in Glynn County, Georgia, in September 2009. Among Roseate Spoonbill and other wading birds, post-breeding dispersal of young birds often presages future nesting locations (Brinkley 2009). Given the recent increase in spoonbill numbers in coastal Georgia, as well as lingering adults observed at several sites through the summer months, it was not surprising that breeding was confirmed in 2011 in Georgia.

The presence of nesting Roseate Spoonbills in Georgia is clearly part of a broader northward expansion of this species out of Florida Bay. This expansion suggests that spoonbills may have reached carrying capacity in Florida Bay, as well as further north at Tampa Bay. Spoonbills require very specific foraging habitat where prey availability is influenced by the interaction of water levels and salinity, both of which have been altered by hydrological manipulations around Florida Bay (Lorenz 2000). Degradation of Florida Bay habitat, coupled with increasing productivity of spoonbill populations over the last

several decades, may be forcing this range expansion (Jerry Lorenz and Peter Frederick, pers. comm.). Several years (2006-2010) of high spoonbill nesting success produced many young birds that are reaching, or have recently reached, breeding age (Jerry Lorenz, pers. comm.). These cohorts of young birds are now approaching maturity, and may be the birds that are responsible for establishing more northern colonies.

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Figure 1. Roseate Spoonbill nest photographed by Timothy Keyes in St. Marys, Camden Co., Georgia, on 28 June 2011.