

Ohio's Second Record of Roseate Spoonbill

Lana Hays

180 York Road, Walton, KY 41094
lhays2@insightbb.com

This past summer and fall, Rocky Fork Lake near Hillsboro in Highland County hosted four immature roseate spoonbills *Platalea ajaja*. Their presence was reportedly first observed sometime in late May 2002 by Zak Jacobs, a college student employed as a summer naturalist by Rocky Fork State Park. Unaware of what they were or their significance, he let them go unreported. On 20 July, Judy Holbrook, an avid bird watcher who lives at the lakeside, observed them in the park's backwaters while looking for swans with her granddaughter. She photographed them on 22 July and notified park rangers and the Ohio Division of Wildlife in Columbus. All the same, the spoonbills remained undiscovered by the birding world until 25 August. At that time Ginny Fantetti, Rick Chanin, and Ken Phillips

came to the area to release a rehabilitated hawk and do some birding at the lake. Fantetti quickly made an identification and Phillips photographed them. The discovery was then made widely known via the Internet. There had been only one previous Ohio sighting: an immature roseate spoonbill seen briefly near the Auglaize River in Defiance County on 24 September 1986. This report is based on my personal observations as well as those related in interviews with Holbrook, Jacobs, and other birders.

During the day, the spoonbills were frequently observed in shallow water across from the boat dock. They were also often seen in the early morning in the backwater across the road, roosting with egrets and herons. They were also seen flying in the evening to a marshy area across the lake from the area where they spent most of the day. Holbrook noted that they spent much of their time in the backwater when she first observed them, but by August the area had dried up due to the drought.

I observed the spoonbills at length during my weekly visits to the lake. In the morning they waded in the shallow water, foraging by sweeping their heads from side to side. By midday they would hop up onto a large log to yawn, stretch their wings, preen, and then nap by standing on one leg, each head turned back and



tucked it into the feathers of the back. During late afternoon they returned to foraging. They always remained among the herons, egrets, and gulls. Occasionally, they were harassed by a great blue heron. The spoonbills seemed less wary of boats and people than did the other birds. If boats approached too closely the herons, egrets, and gulls would quickly leave, flying across the lake. The spoonbills would be the last to go, and then moved only a little further down the shoreline.

One observation made on several occasions was that three of the spoonbills would remain together while a fourth ventured away. This often occurred when they foraged, prepared for sleep, or moved further down the shoreline. Holbrook told me she too had observed this behavior. As the spoonbills were often too far away to determine individual characteristics, I never learned if it was always the same spoonbill isolated from the others.

As October approached, the temperatures began to cool. I called the park office on 4 October to check the status of the spoonbills and was told they had been seen that day. As I drove to the lake two days later to make my weekly visit, I was concerned as the temperature had dropped from 67°F to 46°F the previous night. When I arrived I found only one spoonbill. I searched all the areas where I knew they had been seen and still could find only one. I met another birder who had been there several hours before I arrived and had also searched unsuccessfully for the other three. I immediately thought of the one spoonbill that so often spent time away from the others and wondered if this same bird had managed to get left behind. As campers often reported observations of the spoonbills, I stopped by the park office at the campground. I was the first to report that only one remained. I was informed that several campers had described unusual flight maneuvers the day before. In the evening, I was told, the spoonbills had taken flight with the egrets and gulls. They all continued for some time in a wide circle and eventually returned. No one had ever reported this behavior in the past; the very next day three of the four spoonbills were gone.

My biggest concern was the welfare of the remaining spoonbill. It no longer stayed among the other birds but rather distanced itself, moving farther down the shoreline. During the time when it would normally be foraging, it now either slept or stayed up out of the water on logs. A heron bullied it when it entered the water, forcing the spoonbill to move still farther down and up onto another log. I observed the same behavior on two subsequent visits. On 14 October I returned expecting the worst, as the temperature had dropped from 55°F to 31°F the previous night. To my surprise the lone spoonbill was back with the other birds and was now actively foraging. At one point it even held its ground against a great blue heron. Around 5:30 p.m. I witnessed something I will remember for a lifetime. Suddenly the egrets, the gulls, and the spoonbill took flight. They began to fly in a circular path. The diameter of the circle steadily increased, as did their altitude. They circled and rose until I almost lost sight of them. Then, wheeling as they had on the way up, they came back to earth. If I had to draw the pattern its shape would have resembled a tornado. Until then, I could never quite visualize what the campers had described from the night before the other three spoonbills departed.

The next day the last spoonbill was gone. Three days of searching turned up nothing. Then on 20 October the spoonbill was observed for the last time, in its usual place.

Many questions about the spoonbills remain unanswered. When exactly did they come? Where did they come from? What circumstances brought them? Why did they remain at Rocky Fork Lake? What prompted their departure? We can only speculate about some of the answers. If indeed they arrived in May, then perhaps they came with one of several storms that dumped one or more inches of rain. Why they stayed may be easier to understand. The lake met their needs. Fishes are a major component of their diet, and Jacobs remarked that after the May rains there was an enormous population explosion of fry in that area, unlike anything he had seen before. This bonanza of food, along with a suitable, relatively safe environment, and an array of bird species familiar from their southern home, was apparently ideal. As for their departure, the weather had turned much colder, the water level of the lake had dropped considerably, hunting season was underway, and the gulls and egrets were migrating. Simply put, it was time to go. 🐦

They stayed so long. They were so reliable, so easy to identify at a glance. There were four of them, and they became a state park fixture like the big cottonwood tree or the campground store. They were a bit unreal, too, so pink, their bills so outlandish, their behavior so confiding. The locals called them "pink platypuses." For reasons like these, we may too often have taken them for granted, but theirs was a momentous visit.

The roseate spoonbill's US breeding range lies narrowly beneath the 30th parallel—along the Texas and Louisiana coast of the Gulf of Mexico and in southern Florida. It is a casual visitor as far north as South Carolina and Oklahoma in the east, and is irregular as a post-breeding wanderer in southern California.

Nearby, among our neighboring states and provinces, Indiana, Michigan, Ontario, and West Virginia have no records of roseate spoonbills; Kentucky has one, a bird seen 29 July 1989, and Pennsylvania has another, a record of a moribund bird on 24 May 1968. Farther away, New York has one record, a bird that spent 16 days in 1992, Missouri one that spent 18 days in August 1986, and Illinois has old and faintly dubious reports of a bird on 28 Apr 1887 and one in 1859. The species is also accidental in Missouri, Kansas, and Iowa.

How old were these birds? Spoonbills apparently attain fully adult plumage only by their fourth year of life. Most accounts of the field characters of different age classes rely on Bent's 1926 treatment of marsh birds in the US National Museum series. The standard field guides do not go into detail other than to distinguish young from mature birds. The Highland County birds did not resemble basic-plumaged adults, nor did they match descriptions and illustrations of hatch-year birds. Authorities vary in describing the field marks of intermediate plumages, and even though we possess numerous photographs of these individuals, it seems wisest to describe them simply as "immature" spoonbills.

This Ohio occurrence encompassed a documented 93 days (and perhaps many more, regrettably unconfirmed) at one site, by far a North American record north of its normal range, as was a group of four birds so far north. They also outlasted all other such North American records by staying till 20 October; only two days later Tennessee surpassed this record with the observation of a single bird in Cocke County on 22 October (observer M. Sledjeski); a mostly white bird, it was not one of ours. —Ed.

Gannet Invasion in the Great Lakes: The Role of Storms

Greg Miller

6006 Inishmore Lane, Dublin, OH 43017
hawk-owl@yahoo.com

During the second and third weeks of November 2002, an extraordinary number of northern gannets *Morus bassanus* were reported in the Great Lakes region, with at least nine sightings of this species. Some surmised there were as many as a dozen birds at once in the area. Most of these reports came from Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, but at least three were from inland locations. At least four reports of gannets came from Ohio.

Bruce Peterjohn in *The Birds of Ohio* (2001) recognizes 19 gannet records along Lake Erie between Huron and Cleveland, three in western Lake Erie, and two from inland locations in Ohio. He cites four documented occurrences between 1990 and 1999. The Ohio Bird Records Committee's *Checklist of the Birds of Ohio* indicates 12 records of this bird since 1980. This fall there were as many reports of gannets in Ohio as during the entire decade 1990-1999.

Watching a long stream of gannets pass from one end of the horizon to the other in late fall, or seeing hundreds swirling in a big circle 50 feet in the air and diving headlong into the cold gray waters of the offshore Atlantic are among the unforgettable experiences of North American birding. Northern gannets nest in the Maritime Provinces of eastern Canada and most migrate south along the eastern United States to their coastal wintering grounds between North Carolina and Florida. A smaller number of birds continue around the tip of Florida to winter in the Gulf of Mexico as far west as Texas. A few birds linger in the North Atlantic during winter and a very few accidentally wander up the St. Lawrence River to Lake Ontario, and sometimes as far as Lake Erie.

The species is highly pelagic, generally staying well offshore, and is casual to rare inland near the coast. A small number of migrants appear in larger bodies of water near the coast, such as the Chesapeake Bay, during spring and fall. Offshore in New Jersey, as many as 50,000 of these impressively large seabirds pass by the Avalon sea watch every fall. Up to 2,000 gannets may fly by Avalon in a single day during peak migration.

This peak in fall occurs between the second week of November and the second week of December at Cape May. David Sibley, in *The Birds of Cape May*, states that gannets tend to avoid land and are "probably most numerous 2-15 miles offshore, where attracted to schools of baitfish." Further north, the bulk of gannet migration in Massachusetts occurs between mid-October and the first week of December. Many gannets winter off the coast of North Carolina's Outer Banks and are "...frequently seen just off the beaches...in spectacular plunges just yards away," according to John Fussell's *A Birder's Guide to Coastal North Carolina*. Gannets reach North Carolina by Thanksgiving and stay through February.