

# Nature Notes

...from Sharon

## White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*)

The White Ibis is a medium-long legged wading bird that frequents the Preserve year-round. You will usually see them in small groups. If you noticed the Ibises on the beach the last few weeks, you have seen them in their brightest colors.

Their faces, bills, and legs are a vibrant red-orange, showing off their breeding plumage and their stark blue eyes. The red decurved (curves downward) bill blends into the face of breeding birds; non-breeding birds show a more pink to reddish face. Males and females are similar in color. Its range is usually throughout Florida and the Southeastern United States. Although present throughout the year in most of breeding range, banded birds from United States have been recovered in Mexico, Cuba, and northern South America. It may wander farther north and inland after the breeding season ends.



Their long decurved bills set them apart from other birds with white plumage. They frequent marshes and lawns, as well as beaches where they probe for food with their long bills in the sand near the surf's edge. In marsh areas, you can see them in places like Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. Their main diet is made up of fish and aquatic invertebrates (crayfish, crabs, insects, snails, marine worms) and, to a lesser degree, frogs, snakes, or lizards. They get up to 22 inches long with a wing span of 38 inches.



Juveniles have a brown head, neck, back, and wings with a white belly. They have a dull orange bill and facial skin, and their legs are dull. As they start to mature, they become a blotchy brown and white.

When in flight, their legs and neck are extended and you will see black wing tips on the adults. Look for them in the sky just after sunrise or before sunset as they are going in flocks to/from their rookeries. Breeding season varies and may begin in late-March and run through mid-May. In Florida, eggs have been found up to mid-August. White Ibises are monogamous and colonial, usually nesting in mixed colonies with other wading species such as egrets, and herons.

They build nests of twigs in trees such as mangroves in estuaries or other trees in marsh areas. The inside of the nest is often lined with green leaves and is a sturdier and more deeply cupped nest than most wading birds. Both male and female collect nesting materials; however, the female does most of the nest building. Their nests are usually the lower nest in colonies of multiple species of birds. The clutch is usually from 2 to 5 whitish to bluish eggs that have brownish speckling or irregular spots. It usually takes 21-23 days for the chicks to hatch. Both parents help incubate eggs. The chicks have fine down on head, neck, upper breast and wing, but the rest of the body is initially bare. The down on the head is black and is a smoky-brown on neck and wings. Their eyes are a light brown. The parents regurgitate food into their throat for the young to feed upon. The chicks take another 28-35 days to fledge. By 3 weeks they are venturing out on branches near their nest and by 5 weeks can fly.

The ancient Egyptians regarded their Ibis as sacred, because they believed Thoth (one of their Gods) occasionally came to earth and assumed the form of an Ibis. In America, the White Ibis was once hunted as food by Native Americans and early settlers. It is now protected by law and may not be harmed.