

**THE 1989 BREEDING SEASON ON THE
ALABAMA GULF COAST**

John Dindo and Ken Marion

The avifauna of coastal Alabama was exposed to a very mild spring and summer during 1989. Yet despite these seemingly favorable conditions, the numbers of early nesting herons and egrets on Cat Island in the Mississippi Sound were lower than in recent years. Counts of Tricolored Herons (*Hydranassa tricolor*), Snowy Egrets (*Egretta thula*), and Little Blue Herons (*Florida caerulea*) were 15% below the average for the past two years. There were no major environmental changes on the island itself and no changes induced by man. In contrast, Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*), which are late nesters (June-Aug), had a two-fold increase in breeding pairs as compared to the last two years. The average count per trip throughout the breeding season was 460.



Figure 1. Banded White Ibis nestling on Cat Island. 1989 was the first year this species has nested on Cat Island. (Photo by John Dindo)

Of particular interest was the first nesting record for the White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*) on Cat Island (Fig.1). Five pairs produced 12 fledglings from the island this year. Although a common nester inland, this species is uncommon along the coastline, where only immature birds are normally observed (Gaston, 1976). The Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*)

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has nested previously on Cat Island, as reported by Gaston and Johnson (1977) and in 1987 and 1988 (personal observation). These new breeding species on Cat Island, along with the continued success of the Reddish Egret (*Dichromanassa rufescens*), two pairs with two successful nests, reinforces the need to have Cat Island declared a state sanctuary or included in the Gulf Islands National Seashore.

In addition to the herons and egrets, approximately 50 pairs of Black Skimmers (*Rynchops niger*), three pairs of American Oystercatchers (*Haematopus palliatus*), 15 pairs of Least Terns (*Sterna antillarum*) and numerous Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) nested successfully on Cat Island this year.

The western end of Little Dauphin Island continues to serve as a nesting site for three pairs of Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*) and a pair of Great Egrets (*Casmerodius albus*). Two breeding colonies of Least Terns utilize the western shell hash area and the high spoil bank on the eastern end. This is also the third year that a pair of Ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*) has occupied the same nest. We look forward to the continued success of this beautiful raptor along our shores.

Sand Island, located in the Gulf eight-tenths of a kilometer (one-half mi) south of Dauphin Island, is host to hundreds of coastal birds. One can find Am. Avocets (*Recurvirostra americana*), Reddish Egrets, and Black-necked Stilts (*Himantopus mexicanus*) all feeding in the shallow tidal flats. In one observation over 250 Laughing Gulls (*Larus atricilla*) and 40 Brown Pelicans (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) were counted. Also noted feeding along the tide lines were numerous dowitchers (*Limnodromus* sp), Ruddy Turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*), Black-bellied Plovers, (*Pluvialis squatarola*), Semipalmated Plovers, (*Charadrius seimpalmatus*), and Piping Plovers, (*Pluvialis squatarola*). Unfortunately, the breeding population of Black Skimmers, Least Terns, Forster's Tern (*Sterna forsteri*), and Gull-billed Terns (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) has declined every year for the past four years. Where once they nested throughout the open sand dunes, they are now confined to small grassy areas. Between 5 June and 14 Aug of this year the nests of only 20 skimmers, ten Least Terns, six Gull-billed Terns and ten Forster's Terns were located. This reduction in nesting birds resulted from the high weekend recreational use of Sand Island. In addition, many of these visitors bring their dogs with them. Although Dr. Meyers, Director of the Nongame Division of the Alabama Department of Conservation, and his staff have marked Sand Island well with posted signs to keep people away from nesting areas, the sheer numbers of people alone cause the birds to leave their nests for long periods of time, thereby exposing

the chicks to high temperatures and possible predation.

A pair of Great-horned Owls (*Bubo virginianus*) has nested on Dauphin Island for the past three years. The owls had a successful year with four of these large birds having been observed on the Island.

Dauphin Island's west-end beach is a 13 km (eight mi) long narrow dune field. It is used extensively by a large colony of Least Terns, Royal Terns (*Sterna maxima*) and Black Skimmers. Over the past three years, however, continued vehicular traffic in this area has drastically reduced nesting activity along this section of the island. Although the "No Vehicles On Alabama Dunes and Beaches" signs are everywhere, they are ignored and there is no enforcement.

During the breeding season of 1989, the avifauna of coastal Alabama has experienced some problems. On the other hand, the overall picture is still good, and some positive steps for the future have been taken. The inclusion of Little Dauphin Island into the Bon Secour National Wildlife Reserve has helped create a sanctuary for many of the species being displaced by man. Due to a mild climate and abundant food availability, coastal Alabama should continue to support a large assemblage of birds.

Literature Cited

Gaston, G. R. 1976. Occurrence of four species of ibis near Dauphin Island, Alabama. *Alabama Birdlife* 24: 14.

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AN UNUSUAL NORTHERN FLICKER (*COLAPTES AURATUS*) NEST IN BARBOUR COUNTY

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On 31 May 1989 a Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*) nest with five eggs was discovered in a vertical ground hole approximately 13 cm (5.25 in) wide by 43 cm (17.0 in) deep at Lake Point State Park in Barbour Co., Alabama. The nest was located about 20 m (66.6 ft) west of the bathhouse and about one m (3.33 ft) east of a power unit box on the