

LIMPKIN (*ARAMUS GUARAUNA*): A FIRST FOR ALABAMA**Steve McConnell and Jimmy Wells**

On 30 September 2000, Mike and Gay Voss were boating in the northeast corner of Lewis Smith Lake (Cullman County), near Trimble, Alabama. There they observed a large, brown wading bird they later identified as a Limpkin (*Aramus guarauna*). Realizing the importance of their find, they quickly contacted a relative who is also a member in the Cullman Chapter of the National Audubon Society. Very soon word of this fantastic rarity spread throughout the state birding community. Over the next seven weeks, many birders traveled to view and enjoy the first documented occurrence of this species in Alabama.

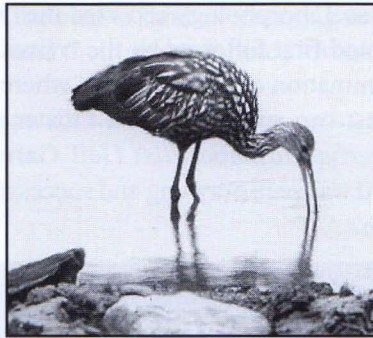


FIGURE 1. Limpkin probing for mussels at Smith Lake, Cullman Co., 6 October 2000 (photograph by Steve McConnell).

In the United States, the historical Limpkin range was considered by A.C. Bent (1927, *Life Histories of North American Marsh Birds*) to be entirely within Florida and southeastern Georgia (Okefenokee Swamp). In recent years several records and possible breeding evidence have been gathered from locations farther north on the Georgia coastal plain (Giff Beaton pers. comm.). Although generally considered non-migratory, over the years Limpkins have been found wandering far outside their normal range to appear in Mississippi, Tennessee, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, and even Nova Scotia (T. White, AVISYS PC Bird Listing Software, Perceptive Systems, 2001 Checklist Update).

A recent Limpkin population crash reported from the Wakulla Springs and River area (Wakulla County, FL), might help explain the appearance of this bird

in Alabama and a Tennessee record from 1999. The exact cause forcing the Wakulla birds to leave this former stronghold remains open to speculation, but possibilities include a reduction in water quality, invasion of choking water plants (*Hydrilla* sp.), or loss of their favored prey item, apple snails (Tom Kennedy pers. comm.).

Observations of the Smith Lake bird revealed its primary food source to be large (3-5") freshwater mussels. The preferred hunting technique was slow, deliberate wading in water a few inches deep while gently probing the submerged mud with a partially open bill (Figure 1). Once a mussel was located and excavated the Limpkin would carry it to a bare mud bar or sometimes onshore. Rather than trying to pry open the bivalve, the bird typically broke through the side using powerful jabs of its long bill. This technique created holes for access to the soft tissue or sometimes completely shattered the shell (Figure 2). One observer familiar with mussel morphology reported the "tender, membraneous mantle tissue" was consumed first followed by the "remaining foot muscle and visceral mass." Later examination of mussel shells where the Limpkin had fed showed evidence of at least two species: Giant Floater (*Pyganodon grandis*) and Paper Pondshell (*Utterbackia imbecillis*) (Jeff Garner pers. comm.). In addition to mussels, the bird was seen pursuing and successfully capturing several small fish on one occasion.

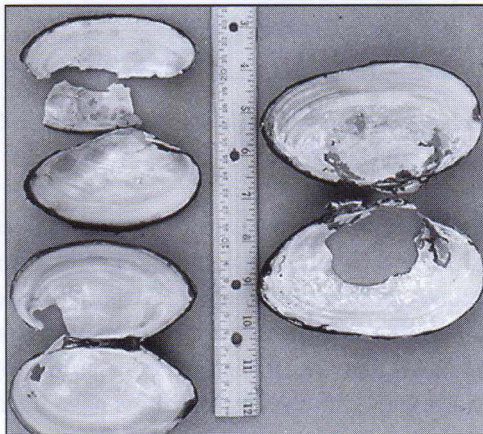


FIGURE 2. Shells of Giant Floater (*Pyganodon grandis*) opened by Limpkin at Smith Lake, November 2000 (photograph by Steve McConnell).

During its stay the bird was seen to fly or run from encounters with Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*) on several occasions. On the other hand, it was

observed at least once chasing away several American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*), which evidently came too close during a mussel hunting foray (Karen White pers. comm.). No reports were collected of this particular Limpkin uttering its famous, piercing 'cry' call; however, at least two birders heard the bird make low, grunting sounds upon close approach.

The Smith Lake Limpkin appeared at times to display little fear of humans. On more than one occasion birders reported approaching the bird (or having the bird approach them) within 10 feet (3 m). During several encounters the bird walked toward and even right past astonished observers with hardly a glance. Once, the bird even stretched toward a seated observer to apparently investigate his open soft drink can! This apparent fearlessness was also noted by Bent (1927) who reported the species to be "almost foolishly tame and unsuspecting". He also reported that when Florida was first settled, Limpkins could be "frequently caught on their nests" and overhunting soon caused both an increase in the bird's wariness and their disappearance "from regions within easy reach of civilization."



Figure 3. Mouth of Ryan Creek (Smith Lake) frequented by Limpkin, November 2000 (photograph by Steve McConnell).

The section of Smith Lake where the Limpkin chose to spend most of its time was near the mouth of Ryan Creek adjacent to a boat dock, several lake houses, and a wide, rocky shoreline (Figure 3). When the bird was first discovered, the lake water level was unusually low following several months of

near drought conditions. The receding water uncovered several large mud bars and a wide, bare shoreline, both of which apparently harbored numerous mussels. By late November, the onset of winter rains had refilled Smith Lake back to an increased height covering most of the favored hunting areas. This food source loss, combined with a seasonal drop in temperature, probably contributed to the bird leaving the area. The Smith Lake Limpkin was last observed in the area on 22 November 2000.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A stretch reveals the Limpkin's large feet, 11 November 2000
(photograph by Greg Harber).