

THE ROSEATE SPOONBILL IN OKLAHOMA

BY JOHN S. SHACKFORD

The range of the Roseate Spoonbill (*Ajaia ajaja*), according to The American Ornithologists' Union Check-list of North American birds (1983), is "... from northern Sinaloa, the Gulf coast of Texas and southwestern Louisiana . . . , and southern Florida south along both coasts of Middle America and through the Greater Antilles . . . Bahamas . . . and South America to central Chile and central Argentina." It was formerly common "in Florida and all along the Gulf coast to Texas" (Bent 1926). Scott (1889), wrote that "The roseate spoonbill was 10 years ago an abundant bird on the Gulf Coast of Florida." However, beginning about the turn of the century the species was hunted extensively for its pink wings which were sold as ladies' fans; by the 1920s the species was "making its last stand in a few remote and isolated localities" in the United States (Bent op. cit.). As recently as 1939 only "a single tiny colony of 15 pairs" existed in Florida (Allen 1962).



ROSEATE SPOONBILL

*An immature bird photographed on 20 July 1987 at Northeast Lake, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma, by John S. Shackford. In addition to the pink feathers on the wing and lower back, note especially the white feathers on most of the head. The head is largely naked in adults.*

Fortunately, the species has, with legal protection, made a remarkable comeback in the United States. Brian Chapman, ornithologist with the Oklahoma Natural Heritage Inventory, spent 17 years working with colonial nesting birds, including the spoonbill, along the Texas coast. He stated that there are now thousands of nesting pairs of spoonbills along the coast (pers. comm., 1991). Estimates in the late 1970s of the numbers of nesting pairs in Texas were 2500 (Texas Colonial Waterbird Society 1982), in southwestern Louisiana 1300 (Portnoy 1977) and in Florida 1400 (Robertson et al. 1983).

In Oklahoma, Sutton (1967) referred to the spoonbill as a "summer and fall visitant from June 30 to October 13." It was first recorded on 15 October 1940 by J.G. Harlow who saw an immature bird feeding along the east side of a "settling basin" just north of Lake Overholser, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. County, dates of sightings and number of spoonbills seen (in parentheses) in the state since then were: Alfalfa, 30 June 3-July 1960 (1), 3 September 1965 (2); Choctaw, 1 August 1959 (4 collected); Cleveland, 14 September 1972 (1); Comanche, 22 August-12 September 1979 (1); Garfield, 7 July 1968 (1 captured and taken to Enid City Zoo); Johnston, 9 and 17 September 1958 (1), 9 September 1971 (3); Oklahoma, 16 August 1952 (1), 5-18 September 1960 (1-4), 3 August 1974 (1); Tillman, 10-13 October 1955 (1); and Tulsa, 6 July (4) and 7 July 1960 (7) (Sutton [1982]). Most of these birds were near large bodies of water.

Since 1982, *Ajaia ajaja* has been reported from several additional locations. In 1984, Nanette Erickson (1986) found two spoonbills and five Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) feeding together on 26 August in a flooded field along the Deep Fork River in Lincoln County. Many other observers saw them at various times until 3 September. Although these spoonbills lacked the crimson shoulder patches characteristic of fully mature birds, they had dark legs and bills and their coloration was similar to the adult winter plumage described by Bent (1926 op. cit.). The fact that there were two birds, possibly a pair, also strengthened Erickson's contention that they might have been adults, none of which had ever before been reported in Oklahoma.

On 17 July 1987 Ernest E. Wilson found a spoonbill in immature plumage at Northeast Lake, located adjacent to the Oklahoma City Zoo, in Oklahoma County. A check with zoo personnel revealed that no Roseate Spoonbill had recently been in captivity at the zoo, therefore this bird was obviously wild. It remained there for approximately a week; several local observers studied it at length before its departure. The lake had been partially drained. The spoonbill, along with about 20 semi-tame ducks, was apparently attracted by the shallow water, where I watched it probe for about 20 minutes. Its method of feeding was to sift its bill from side to side at or near the bottom. I photographed the spoonbill on 20 July and one of my photos (see cover) appeared in *The Daily Oklahoman* on 29 July 1987. Later that same year, a bird with pink back and wings (probably immature) was discovered by Jo Loyd and Pat Seibert on 7 September along the Arkansas River near Bixby in Tulsa County. This bird was viewed by several persons during the ensuing three days (Grzybowski 1988).

In northwestern Creek County, an apparent immature spoonbill was observed by Pat Seibert, Jo Loyd and others. It was pale pink and had yellowish legs. This one appeared on the Cimarron River arm of Keystone Reservoir at

the State Highway 48 bridge on 13 and 14 August 1989 (Grzybowski 1990).

At Sequoyah National Wildlife Refuge in eastcentral Oklahoma, Roy Callison found a pink spoonbill about 0900 on 18 August 1989, a calm, clear day. It was 75 yards away, feeding in the aforementioned fashion. Callison notified Craig Heflebower and Bernice DeSantos, Assistant Refuge Managers, of the spoonbill. Heflebower, after laboriously crawling through dense aquatic vegetation, saw it from only several feet away. As it flew off, DeSantos noticed darker red areas on the wings, indicating that this spoonbill was probably an adult.

After nesting along the coast, at least a few Roseate Spoonbills wander northward. The species is "Casual or accidental north to . . . Colorado, Nebraska, southeastern Kansas [and] Arkansas . . ." (AOU 1983 op. cit.) In Florida, Scott (1889 op. cit.) observed that "immediately after the breeding season was finished, . . . there was a great dispersal of birds to the northward, particularly along the coast, though they were common at points in the interior." Chapman (pers. comm., 1991) believes that most individuals that arrive in Oklahoma originate from the Texas colonies. Because of the increased nesting success that this species has recently experienced along the Gulf coast, Oklahomans may encounter it more often in the future as some birds move northward, particularly during the postbreeding period, i.e., late summer and early fall.

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