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WHITE-FACED IBIS BREEDING IN RIO ARRIBA COUNTY:
SECOND VERIFIED NESTING LOCATION FOR NEW MEXICO

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The White-faced Ibis (*Plegadis chihi*) is a colonially nesting species that in North America breeds primarily in the western United States (A.O.U. 1983), with notable concentrations in the Great Basin region and along the coasts of Louisiana and Texas (Ryder 1967). The species also nests in isolated colonies in the highlands of Mexico in Durango and Jalisco (Williams 1978). Inland, the species reaches its greatest breeding densities in the marshes of Utah and Nevada, where nesting aggregations of 3,000 to 5,000 pairs have been recorded at several localities (Ryder 1967, Ryser 1985). Although small flocks of nonbreeding ibises may be found at scattered localities in New Mexico almost annually during the summer breeding season, there is only one record of the species actually nesting in the state, that being a single nest found in eastern New Mexico at Tukumcari, Quay County, in June 1973 (Hundertmark 1974, Hubbard 1978). In this paper, I document the discovery of nesting White-faced Ibises in north-central New Mexico at Stinking Lake, Rio Arriba County, which represents the second verified ibis nesting locality for the state.

STUDY AREA

Stinking (or Burford) Lake, New Mexico's largest natural lake, is on the Jicarilla Apache Reservation approximately 30 km south of Dulce. The lake lies at an elevation of 2,130 m, and varies in size according to the amount of precipitation within its drainage basin. The surface area in October 1985, as measured from aerial photographs, was 440 ha; however, the lake shrinks during droughts and reportedly was dry in 1954 and 1977. Two small natural lakes (Upper and Lower Thompson lakes) and a small, dammed natural lake (Hayden Lake) are also in the immediate vicinity (Figure 1). The dominant emergent vegetation is roundstem bulrush (*Scirpus occidentalis*), which occurs chiefly along lake margins.

RESULTS

I began intensive field work in the Stinking Lake area in 1987. Six White-faced Ibises were seen on 12 June 1987 at Upper Thompson Lake, and two adults were there on 17 July. On 7 August, two adults and a hatching-year immature were photographed on Lower Thompson Lake but, as all three birds could fly, this record alone could not provide proof of local nesting in 1987.

In 1988, White-faced Ibises were much more common at Stinking Lake. Nineteen were counted on the lake on 11 June, and two were present at Upper Thompson Lake the following day. On 25 June, at least 42 ibises were present on Stinking Lake and a colony containing seven nests was found in an isolated stand of roundstem bulrush in West Bay (Figure 1). Two of these nests each contained a single egg, two others were fully constructed but lacked eggs, while the three remaining nests appeared to be still under construction. Four of the seven nests were built over abandoned Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) nests. The ibises had flattened the bulrush stems that were woven into the blackbird nests and had built their nests upon the resulting platforms. When revisited on 24 July, this colony had four nests each with three eggs, one partially constructed nest, and five nests in various stages of deterioration. One of the three-egg clutches had two eggs that had been destroyed by a predator. On 6 August, two more predator-destroyed nests (each with three eggs) were found. The punctured nature of the eggs suggested that the predator was avian, quite possibly the Common Raven (*Corvus corax*).

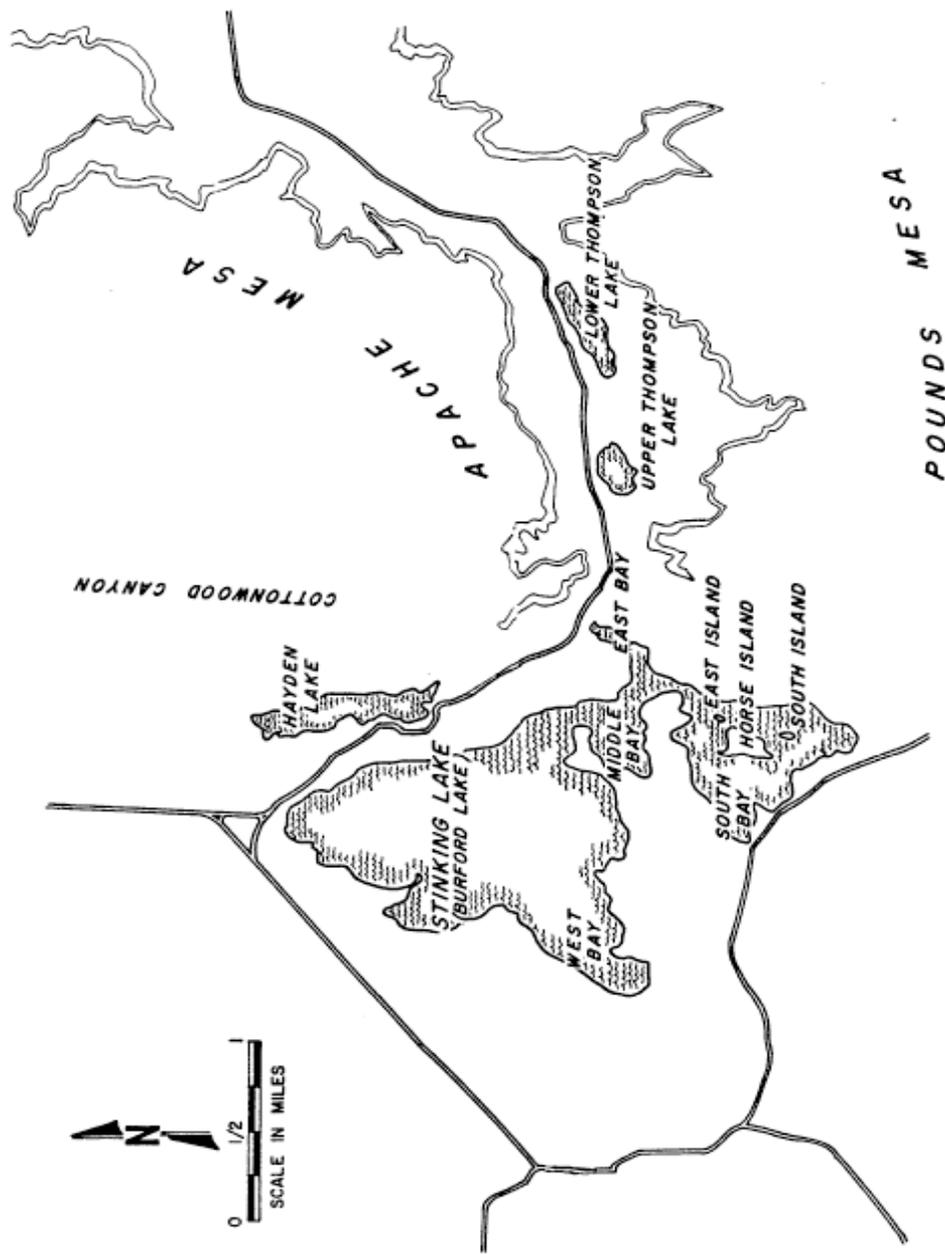


Figure 1. Map of Stinking (Burford) Lake and adjacent lakes, Jicarilla Apache Reservation, Rio Arriba County, New Mexico.

A second nesting colony in a separate West Bay bulrush stand had three nests (with two, four, and five eggs) on 24 July 1988, but when revisited on 6 August only one decaying nest was found. Two isolated nests were also found 24-25 July 1988: one containing three eggs was in a third West Bay bulrush stand while the other, containing two eggs, was at the north end of the lake in near-shore bulrushes. This last nest was empty and disintegrating on 6 August; the other lone nest could not be relocated.

In all, a minimum of 15 White-faced Ibis nests, at least nine of which contained eggs, was found at Stinking Lake in 1988. However, no eggs were known to have hatched, apparently because of predation. Such poor nesting success may be typical of small ibis colonies. Capen (1977) found nesting success was highest in large colonies at major concentration areas and poorer in peripheral or satellite colonies. Ibis nest success (percent of nests fledging young) varied from 3.2 to 94.1 percent in Utah colonies (Steele 1980) and from 0 to 78 percent in Colorado colonies (Schreur 1987).

Photographs of two of the nests were deposited in the New Mexico Ornithological Society Archives, and two eggs that had been punctured by a predator are currently in the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish collection.

DISCUSSION

White-faced Ibises were not recorded at Stinking Lake during three previous intensive investigations that were conducted there in 1913 (J. S. Ligon in Bailey 1928), 1918 (Wetmore 1920), and 1960 (Huey and Travis 1961). The only summer records of this species in north-central New Mexico that I am aware of were of two that were seen near Regina (45 km south of Stinking Lake), on 21 June 1975 by J. N. Durrie and J. P. Fitzsimmons (NMOS Field Notes 14(2):25, 1975) and a single bird seen at Stinking Lake on 9 July 1982 by J. N. Durrie (NMOS Field Notes 21(3):43, 1982). No additional summer sightings of this species from the Stinking Lake area were reported in the NMOS Field Notes during the period 1962 to 1986, although fairly extensive observations on other species were reported from there in various years (e.g., 1968, 1970, 1972, 1975, and 1976). Because the area has been inconsistently monitored during the twentieth century, it is possible that White-faced Ibises may have bred at Stinking Lake in some years prior to 1988; nevertheless, there is no evidence that they actually did so.

The 1988 nesting effort at Stinking Lake could be related to 1) increasing White-faced Ibis numbers in the nearby San Luis Valley of southern Colorado, 2) a general dispersal of breeding ibises from Great Basin colonies, 3) the nomadic nature of White-faced Ibises, or 4) other, unknown causes. The San Luis Valley site in Colorado, only 130 km northeast of Stinking Lake, is the closest area to Stinking Lake that is consistently used by nesting White-faced Ibises. The species is known to have nested there at least as early as 1875, and regularly there since the 1940s (Ryder et al. 1980, Schreur 1987). Although up to 60 pairs bred there in the 1940s (Ryder 1967), the population was reduced to less than half that number by the 1970s (Ryder et al. 1980). In recent years, however, breeding numbers there have increased dramatically: 115 nests in 1986, 150 nests in 1987, and 225 nests in 1988 (Am. Birds 42:1321, 1988). The Stinking Lake nesters may be a satellite colony of the increasing Colorado population.

Also of note are recently documented increases in White-faced Ibis breeding numbers in eastern Oregon, from 600 pairs in 1980 to 2,595 pairs in 1987 (Ivey et al. 1988). These increases are believed to be partially due to relocation of ibises from nesting areas outside Oregon and likely related to the flooding of the marshes of Utah's Great Salt Lake from 1982 to 1985. If those large Utah nesting populations were indeed reduced by 80 percent (D. Paul in Ivey et al. 1988), then relocation of breeding adults to suitable habitat elsewhere, such as in New Mexico, is reasonable.

In general, however, White-faced Ibises are somewhat nomadic, with nesting populations taking up residence in those localities where breeding conditions are most favorable (Capen 1977). The 1988

nesting effort at Stinking Lake may merely represent such opportunistic breeding and be unrelated to developments elsewhere.

SUMMARY

A minimum of 15 White-faced Ibis nests, nine containing eggs, was found at Stinking Lake in 1988. However, no eggs were known to have hatched, apparently because of avian predation. This represents the second verified ibis nesting locality for New Mexico, the first being a single nest found at Tucumcari in 1973. Earlier studies, dating back to 1913, failed to find breeding ibises in the Stinking Lake area. The 1988 nesting effort could be related to increasing ibis numbers in nearby Colorado nesting populations, to a general dispersal of breeding ibises from inundated Great Basin habitats, to the nomadic nature of White-faced Ibises that results in the opportunistic establishment of new colonies in suitable habitat, or to other, unknown causes.

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