THE WOOD IBIS.

†TANTALUS LOCULATOR, *Linn.*

PLATE CCCLXI.—MALE.

This very remarkable bird, and all others of the same genus that are known to occur in the United States, are constant residents in some part of our Southern Districts, although they perform short migrations. A few of them now and then stray as far as the Middle States, but instances of this are rare; and I am not aware that any have been seen farther to the eastward than the southern portions of Maryland, excepting a few individuals of the Glossy and the White Ibises, which have been procured in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. The Carolinas, Georgia, the Floridas, Alabama, Lower Louisiana, including Opellousas, and Mississippi, are the districts to which they resort by preference, and in which they spend the whole year. With the exception of the Glossy Ibis, which may be looked upon as a bird of the Mexican territories, and which usually appears in the Union singly or in pairs, they all live socially in immense flocks, especially during the breeding season. The country which they inhabit is doubtless the best suited to their habits; the vast and numerous swamps, lagoons, bayous, and submersed savannahs that occur in the lower parts of our Southern States, all abounding with fishes and reptiles; and the temperature of these countries being congenial to their constitutions.

In treating of the bird now under your notice, Mr. WILLIAM BARTRAM says, "This solitary bird does not associate in flocks, but is generally seen alone." This was published by WILSON, and every individual who has since written on the subject, has copied the assertion without probably having any other reason than that he believed the authors of it to state a fact. But the habits of this species are entirely at variance with the above quotation, to which I direct your attention not without a feeling of pain, being assured that Mr. BARTRAM could have made such a statement only because he had few opportunities of studying the bird in question in its proper haunts.

The Wood Ibis is rarely met with single, even after the breeding season, and it is more easy for a person to see a hundred together at any period of the year, than to meet with one by itself. Nay, I have seen flocks composed of several thousands, and that there is a natural necessity for their

W.H.

Wood Stork.

Male

Drawn from Nature by J.J. Audubon F.R.S.E.L.S.

Lith^d. Printed & Col^d. by J.T. Bowen, Philad^a.

flocking together I shall explain to you. This species feeds entirely on fish and aquatic reptiles, of which it destroys an enormous quantity, in fact more than it eats; for if they have been killing fish for half an hour and have gorged themselves, they suffer the rest to lie on the water untouched, when it becomes food for Alligators, Crows, and Vultures, whenever these animals can lay hold of it. To procure its food, the Wood Ibis walks through shallow muddy lakes or bayous in numbers. As soon as they have discovered a place abounding in fish, they dance as it were all through it, until the water becomes thick with the mud stirred from the bottom by their feet. The fishes, on rising to the surface, are instantly struck by the beaks of the Ibises, and, on being deprived of life, they turn over and so remain. In the course of ten or fifteen minutes, hundreds of fishes, frogs, young alligators, and water-snakes cover the surface, and the birds greedily swallow them until they are completely gorged, after which they walk to the nearest margins, place themselves in long rows, with their breasts all turned towards the sun, in the manner of Pelicans and Vultures, and thus remain for an hour or so. When digestion is partially accomplished, they all take to wing, rise in spiral circlings to an immense height, and sail about for an hour or more, performing the most beautiful evolutions that can well be conceived. Their long necks and legs are stretched out to their full extent, the pure white of their plumage contrasts beautifully with the jetty black of the tips of their wings. Now in large circles they seem to ascend toward the upper regions of the atmosphere; now, they pitch towards the earth; and again, gently rising, they renew their gyrations. Hunger once more induces them to go in search of food, and, with extended front, the band sails rapidly towards another lake or bayou.

Mark the place, reader, and follow their course through cane-brake, cypress-swamp, and tangled wood. Seldom do they return to the same feeding place on the same day. You have reached the spot, and are standing on the margin of a dark-watered bayou, the sinuosities of which lead your eye into a labyrinth ending in complete darkness. The tall canes bow to each other from the shores; the majestic trees above them, all hung with funereal lichen, gently wave in the suffocating atmosphere; the bullfrog, alarmed, shrinks back into the water; the alligator raises his head above its surface, probably to see if the birds have arrived, and the wily cougar is stealthily advancing toward one of the Ibises, which he expects to carry off into the thicket. Through the dim light your eye catches a glimpse of the white-plumaged birds, moving rapidly like spectres to and fro. The loud clacking of their mandibles apprises you of the havoc they commit among the terrified inhabitants of the waters. Move, gently or not, move at all, and you infallibly lose your opportunity of observing the actions of the birds.

Some old male has long marked you; whether it has been with eye or with ear, no matter. The first stick your foot cracks, his hoarse voice sounds the alarm. Off they all go, battering down the bending canes with their powerful pinions, and breaking the smaller twigs of the trees, as they force a passage for themselves.

Talk to me of the stupidity of birds, of the dulness of the Wood Ibis! say it is fearless, easily approached, and easily shot. I listen, but it is merely through courtesy; for I have so repeatedly watched its movements, in all kinds of circumstances, that I am quite convinced we have not in the United States a more shy, wary, and vigilant bird than the Wood Ibis. In the course of two years spent, I may say, among them, for I saw some whenever I pleased during that period, I never succeeded in surprising one, not even under night, when they were roosting on trees at a height of nearly a hundred feet, and sometimes rendered farther secure by being over extensive swamps.

My Journal informs me, that, one autumn while residing near Bayou Sara, being intent on procuring eight or ten of these birds, to skin for my learned and kind friend the Prince of MUSIGNANO, I took with me two servants, who were first-rate woodsmen, and capital hands at the rifle, and that notwithstanding our meeting with many hundreds of Wood Ibises, it took us three days to shoot fifteen, which were for the most part killed on wing with rifle-balls, at a distance of about a hundred yards. On that occasion we discovered that a flock roosted regularly over a large corn-field covered with huge girted trees, the tops of which were almost all decayed. We stationed ourselves apart in the field, concealed among the tall ripened corn, and in silence awaited the arrival of the birds. After the sun had disappeared, the broad front of a great flock of Ibises was observed advancing towards us. They soon alighted in great numbers on the large branches of the dead trees; but whenever one of the branches gave way under their weight, all at once rose in the air, flew about several times, and alighted again. One of my companions, having a good opportunity, fired, and brought two down with a single bullet; but here the sport was ended. In five minutes after, not an Ibis was within a mile of the place, nor did any return to roost there for more than a month. When on the margin of a lake, or even in the centre of it—for all the lakes they frequent are exceedingly shallow—the first glimpse they have of a man induces them to exert all their vigilance; and should he after this advance a few steps, the birds fly off.

The name of "Wood Ibis" given to this bird, is not more applicable to it than to any other species; for every one with which I am acquainted resorts quite as much to the woods at particular periods. All our species may be found on wet savannahs, on islands surrounded even by the waters of the

sea, the Florida Keys for example, or in the most secluded parts of the darkest woods, provided they are swampy, or are furnished with ponds. I have found the Wood, the Red, the White, the Brown, and the Glossy Ibises around ponds in the centre of immense forests; and in such places, even in the desolate pine-barrens of the Floridas; sometimes several hundred miles from the sea coast, on the Red river, in the State of Louisiana, and above Natchez, in that of Mississippi, as well as within a few miles of the ocean. Yet, beyond certain limits, I never saw one of these birds.

One of the most curious circumstances connected with this species is, that although the birds are, when feeding, almost constantly within the reach of large alligators, of which they devour the young, these reptiles never attack them; whereas, if a Duck or a Heron comes within the reach of their tails, it is immediately killed and swallowed. The Wood Ibis will wade up to its belly in the water, round the edges of "alligators' holes," without ever being injured; but should one of these birds be shot, an alligator immediately makes towards it and pulls it under water. The gar-fish is not so courteous, but gives chase to the Ibises whenever an opportunity occurs. The snapping-turtle is also a great enemy to the young birds of this species.

The flight of the Wood Ibis is heavy at its rising from the ground. Its neck at that moment is deeply curved downward, its wings flap heavily but with great power, and its long legs are not stretched out behind until it has proceeded many yards. But as soon as it has attained a height of eight or ten feet, it ascends with great celerity, generally in a spiral direction, in silence if not alarmed, or, if frightened, with a rough croaking guttural note. When fairly on wing, they proceed in a direct flight, with alternate flappings and sailings of thirty or forty yards, the sailings more prolonged than the flappings. They alight on trees with more ease than Herons generally do, and either stand erect or crouch on the branches, in the manner of the Wild Turkey, the Herons seldom using the latter attitude. When they are at rest, they place their bill against the breast, while the neck shrinks as it were between the shoulders. In this position you may see fifty on the same tree, or on the ground, reposing in perfect quiet for hours at a time, although some individual of the party will be constantly on the look-out, and ready to sound the alarm.

In the spring months, when these birds collect in large flocks, before they return to their breeding places, I have seen thousands together, passing over the woods in a line more than a mile in extent, and moving with surprising speed at the height of only a few yards above the trees. When a breeding place has once been chosen, it is resorted to for years in succession; nor is it easy to make them abandon it after they have deposited their eggs, although, if much annoyed, they never return to it after that season.

Besides the great quantity of fishes that these Ibises destroy, they also devour frogs, young alligators, wood-rats, young rails and grakles, fiddlers and other crabs, as well as snakes and small turtles. They never eat the eggs of the alligator, as has been alleged, although they probably would do so, could they demolish the matted nests of that animal, a task beyond the power of *any* bird known to me. I never saw one eat any thing which either it or some of its fellows had not killed. Nor will it eat an animal that has been dead for some time, even although it may have been killed by itself. When eating, the clacking of their mandibles may be heard at the distance of several hundred yards.

When wounded, it is dangerous to approach them, for they bite severely. They may be said to be very tenacious of life. Although usually fat, they are very tough and oily, and therefore are not fit for food. The negroes, however, eat them, having, previous to cooking them, torn off the skin, as they do with Pelicans and Cormorants. My own attempts, I may add, were not crowned with success. Many of the negroes of Louisiana destroy these birds when young for the sake of the oil which their flesh contains, and which they use in greasing machines.

The French Creoles of that State name them "Grands Flamans," while the Spaniards of East Florida know them by the name of "Gannets." When in the latter country, at St. Augustine, I was induced to make an excursion, to visit a large pond or lake, where I was assured there were Gannets in abundance, which I might shoot off the trees, provided I was careful enough. On asking the appearance of the Gannets, I was told that they were large white birds, with wings black at the end, a long neck, and a large sharp bill. The description so far agreeing with that of the Common Gannet or Solan Goose, I proposed no questions respecting the legs or tail, but went off. Twenty-three miles, reader, I trudged through the woods, and at last came in view of the pond; when, lo! its borders and the trees around it were covered with Wood Ibises. Now, as the good people who gave the information spoke according to their knowledge, and agreeably to their custom of calling the Ibises Gannets, had I not gone to the pond, I might have written this day that Gannets are found in the interior of the woods in the Floridas, that they alight on trees, &c. which, if *once* published, would in all probability have gone down to future times through the medium of compilers, and all perhaps without acknowledgment.

The Wood Ibis takes four years in attaining full maturity, although birds of the second year are now and then found breeding. This is rare, however, for the young birds live in flocks by themselves, until they have attained the age of about three years. They are at first of a dingy brown, each feather edged with paler; the head is covered to the mandibles with short downy

feathers, which gradually fall off as the bird advances in age. In the third year, the head is quite bare, as well as a portion of the upper part of the neck. In the fourth year, the bird is as you see it in the plate. The male is much larger and heavier than the female, but there is no difference in colour between the sexes.

WOOD IBIS, *Tantalus Loculator*, Wils. Amer. Orn., vol. viii. p. 39.

TANTALUS LOCULATOR, Bonap. Syn., p. 310.

WOOD IBIS, Nutt. Man., vol. ii. p. 82.

WOOD IBIS, *Tantalus Loculator*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. iii. p. 128.

Male, $44\frac{1}{2}$, 62; bill, 9.

Resident from Texas to North Carolina, in deep woody swamps; or fresh-water lakes, not on the sea-shores; breeds on trees in swamps; moves in large flocks. Up the Mississippi to Natchez. Abundant in Florida and Lower Louisiana.

Adult Male.

Bill long, stout, at the base as wide as the face, deeper than broad, compressed, tapering towards the end, which is curved. Upper mandible with the dorsal line straight to near the end, then considerably curved, the ridge rather broad and flattened at the base, narrowed at the middle, convex towards the end, the sides sloping and rather flat at the base, towards the end rounded, the edges overlapping, inflected, sharp but strong, the tip declinate, narrow, rounded, with a notch on either side. Nostrils basal, close to the ridge, direct, pervious, oblong; no nasal groove. Lower mandible curved towards the end, like the upper, its angle rather wide, and having a bare dilatable membrane, the sides rather flat and erect at the base, afterwards narrowed and with the back rounded, the edges erect, sharp, with a groove externally for the insertion of those of the upper mandible.

Head of ordinary size, short, compressed. Neck long. Body rather slender, deeper than broad. Wings large. Feet very long, slender, like those of the Heron. Tibia long, slender, bare for one-half of its length; and with the long, compressed tarsus, covered all round with hexagonal scales. Toes rather long and slender, the first smallest, the second next in length, the third longest, the fourth intermediate between the second and third, all covered above with numerous scutella, laterally with angular scales, beneath flattened with soft margins, the anterior connected at the base by pretty large webs, of which the outer is larger. Claws small, rather compressed, rounded above, obtuse, the thin edge of that of the third not serrated.

The head all round, and the hind neck half way down, destitute of feathers, the skin wrinkled and covered with irregular scurfy scales. Plumage in general rather loose, more so on the neck. Wings long, ample, primaries

strong, the third longest, second almost as long, fourth about the same length as third, first considerably shorter, all curved, emarginate, of twelve broad, rounded feathers.

Bill dusky yellowish-brown, the edges yellow. Sides of the head dark bluish-purple, upper part of the head horn-colour or dull greyish-yellow, the rest of the bare skin of the same tint, many of the scales anteriorly blue. Iris deep brown, at a distance seeming black. Tibia and tarsus indigo-blue. Toes above black, on the lateral and hind toes, however, many of the scutella bluish-grey; the webs pale yellowish flesh-colour; claws black.

The general colour of the plumage is pure white with a tinge of yellow. Alula, primary coverts, primary and secondary quills, excepting the inner, and tail, black, with green and purplish-blue reflections, according to the light in which they are viewed.

Length to end of tail $44\frac{1}{2}$ inches, to end of claws $59\frac{1}{2}$, to end of wings $46\frac{1}{2}$; wing from flexure 18; tail 6; extent of wings 62; bill along the back $9\frac{1}{2}$, along the edge 9, its greatest depth $2\frac{1}{4}$; bare part of tibia 6; tarsus 9; middle toe $4\frac{2}{12}$, its claw $\frac{3}{4}$. Weight $11\frac{3}{4}$ lbs.

The Female is precisely similar to the male, differing merely in being smaller. Its weight is $9\frac{1}{4}$ lbs.

The Young are dusky-grey all over, the quills and tail brownish-black. The head all covered with down, excepting just at the base of the bill. After the first moult, the bare space extends over the head and cheeks; the downy feathers of the hind head and neck are dusky; the general colour of the plumage is white, the quills and tail nearly as in the adult, but with less gloss. A male of this description shot in January was in length 35 inches, its bill $7\frac{1}{2}$, tarsus 7, middle toe 4, its claw $\frac{1}{2}$; its weight $7\frac{3}{4}$ lbs.

When the Wood Ibis has caught a fish too large to be easily swallowed, it shakes its head in a violent manner, as if to force its prey down or drive it up again. In the latter case, it carries the fish to the shore, and breaks it into pieces, which it then swallows.

This species has the subcutaneous cellular tissue highly developed, especially along the breast, and the lower parts of the body, although not by any means so much so as in the Brown Pelican. I have represented a flock of these birds in the back ground, with the view of giving you an idea of the swamps to which they usually resort. They are on the edge of an alligator's hole, at their avocations. The trees clad with dangling mosses, afford evidence of the insalubrity of the atmosphere. You see the alligators with their heads and backs above water, watching the motions of the birds.

W.H.

Wood Stork.

Male

Audubon, John James. 1843. "The Wood Ibis, *Tantalus loculator*, Linn. [Pl. 361]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 6, 64–70. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319475>.

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