

Glossy Ibis and the identification challenges of hybrid *Plegadis* in Colorado

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Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*) has, in the past 20 years or so, become a regular, though still rare, part of Colorado's migrant avifauna. The CBRC lists 39 accepted records and though the first record was from *Delta* on 27 March 1986, virtually all other records are from the Eastern Plains and all but three (including the above) occurred in the period 11 April - 28 May. Though the rate of accrual of accepted records is at the threshold at which the species may be removed from the state review list (Anonymous 2002), the Colorado Bird Records Committee has not removed it for two reasons. The first is that field identification of Glossy and White-faced (*P. chihi*) ibises is difficult, particularly for birds not in alternate plumage, and continued confusion in that vein certainly seems to me to be a valid cause for retention of the species on the review list. The second is that the advent of apparent hybridization between the two species—including apparent hybrid individuals in Oklahoma (Arterburn and Grzybowski 2003) and apparent mixed breeding pairs in Wyoming (Faulkner 2005)—complicates identification of some alternate-plumaged adults. In fact, hybrid ibis have been reported from Colorado during each of the past four springs, with some of the birds that exhibit mixed characteristics being nicely photographed. I was lucky to find and photograph such a bird near Beebe Draw, *Weld*, on 23 April 2005 and pictures of it (the top two pictures presented on the back cover) provide the basis for this column.

Now that I have seen four apparent first-generation (F1) hybrid *Plegadis* ibises in Colorado (two each in *Weld* and *Boulder* counties), my experience suggests that such birds are easily misidentified as Glossy Ibis, even more so than as White-faced Ibis. This is because they seem to sport more Glossy Ibis-like features, with the blue borders above and below the bare facial skin typical of that species. Such apparent F1 hybrids generally sport the following features:

- bluish upper and lower borders to the facial skin;
- reddish irides that are less bright than typical of White-faced Ibis;
- facial skin that ranges from all violet to a mixture of pinkish, violet, and dark blue;

- leg color more like that of Glossy Ibis, with dull-colored tibiae and tarsi but usually brighter and pinker tibia-tarsal (“ankle”) joints;
- bill coloration two-toned with varying degrees of gray (White-faced) and brown (Glossy).

Pictures, statements, and/or illustrations in other sources (Sibley 2000, Arterburn and Grzybowski 2003, Semo 2007) agree with these conclusions. The most useful aspect of my pictures of the Beebe Draw hybrid (back cover) is that the bird is in company with both Glossy and White-faced ibises, thus enabling direct comparison in which the above features are readily noted.

Whether I (and others) am overlooking White-faced Ibis-like F1 hybrids cannot now be determined, but I certainly cannot discount the possibility, as the genetics of suspected hybrids, particularly as they relate to appearance, have not been addressed. Additionally, backcross hybrids (e.g., the products of pairings between pure birds and F1 hybrids) would probably be more similar in appearance to the pure parent and thus could be considerably harder to detect than are F1 hybrids; indeed, such has been shown to be true of backcross hybrids of Kelp and Herring gulls in Louisiana (Dittman and Cardiff 2005).

In fact, in researching this topic and looking through my own pictures of *Plegadis* ibis, I found pictures of an individual that I had identified through the camera as a White-faced Ibis, but which, scrutiny of the pictures suggests, may be a White-faced-like backcross hybrid. The bottom picture on the back cover shows this individual. Note that the bird exhibits a fairly typical White-faced Ibis facial pattern but that there is a hint of violet in the distal portion of the facial skin, that the eye is not quite as red as is typical for White-faced Ibis, and that the bird’s legs and bill are colored like those of a Glossy Ibis.

The species: Glossy (*Plegadis falcinellus*), White-faced (*P. chihi*), and hybrid ibis.

The context: The warmer months anywhere in Colorado, but especially the Eastern Plains in migration.

The problem: The number of hybrids seems to be increasing, complicating this already-tricky identification.

(See photos on back cover.)

Additional Identification Information

As identification of difficult species is generally best accomplished with as large a suite of characters as possible, quite a few observers have been trying to determine whether there are any features besides face and leg characters that can help separate Glossy and White-faced ibises and their hybrids. One such character that is receiving scrutiny now and that appears to work given good views is the color of the tertials. Marshall Iliff pointed this character out to me a few years back and I have been “test driving” it since. Though it seems to work fairly well for birds in alternate plumage, its usefulness for other plumages appears to be low or non-existent. In alternate plumage, Glossy Ibis have tertials that tend to green and violet, with no bronze aspect, and they are mostly concolorous with most of the rest of the wing, particularly the greater coverts. White-faced Ibis have green tertials, too, but ones with significant bronze aspects that contrast somewhat with the non-bronzy greater coverts. This difference is depicted fairly well in the top picture on the back cover, in which the hybrid ibis sports White-faced Ibis-like tertials. Note that the apparent backcross in the bottom picture does not have any visible bronze aspect to its tertials, a feature that, in combination with the leg pattern, suggests an infusion of Glossy Ibis genes in that bird’s chromosomes.

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Hybrid White-faced \times Glossy Ibis, left; and Glossy Ibis, right.
Photographed 23 April 2005 by Tony Leukering at Beebe Draw, Weld County, CO.



Same birds as in above photo, plus two White-faced Ibises. From left to right: Glossy Ibis; White-faced Ibis; White-faced Ibis; hybrid ibis.



Possible backcross hybrid between a White-faced Ibis and a White-faced \times Glossy Ibis. *Photographed 12 May 2006 by Tony Leukering at East Reservoir, Jefferson County, CO.*