

## ROSEATE SPOONBILLS (*AJAIA AJAJA*) NESTING AT AN INLAND LOCATION IN THE EVERGLADES

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Roseate Spoonbills (*Ajaia ajaja*) often breed in freshwater areas in much of their range (Hancock et al. 1993), but in the United States they breed almost exclusively on coastal islands and feed almost entirely in coastal habitats while breeding (Allen 1942, Ogden 1978, Bjork and Powell 1993). Here, we report on a small nesting of Roseate Spoonbills in the central, freshwater Everglades during the spring of 1992, and provide details of the conditions leading up to the nesting, and in part, the history of one of the birds nesting. To our knowledge, this is the first report of inland nesting by this species in the Everglades.

During March-June of 1992, we found conclusive evidence of Roseate Spoonbills breeding at one colony in Water Conservation Area 3 (WCA 3), and activity which suggested possible breeding at three others. We first noted adult spoonbills flying in and out of the Andytown colony site (south of SR 84 and west of SR 27, at 26° 06' 40"N, 80° 29' 29"W) in late February; nesting material was seen in the bill of an adult on 20 March. After observing the colony in April, a search on 1 May revealed eight nests in willow trees (*Salix caroliniana*). The nests held half-grown and larger spoonbill young; most had two young and some three. Some young were branch-walking and could not be associated with a particular nest. Judging from the numbers of adults using the colony and the numbers of nests we located, it is likely that at least 20 nests were active at Andytown in 1992.

We also found one adult that was bearing a radio transmitter, placed on the bird in Florida Bay by Robin Bjork and George Powell earlier in the year. The radio-marked bird had previously initiated nesting in Florida Bay, but was unsuccessful. This bird's behavior at the Andytown colony suggested that it was making a second breeding attempt. The bird was present during early morning when most nonbreeding birds would be feeding, and it made regular trips to the colony during the day, landing in the colony in the general vicinity of the nests. The interval between visits was consistent with feeding trips to provision young, implying that this inland nesting attempt was successful. The other nests were probably also successful, because we observed on 9 June at least 12 fledgling spoonbills in the vicinity of the nests.

Adult Roseate Spoonbills were also seen carrying nesting material in late April at two colonies along Tamiami Trail (U.S. 41) at 25° 45' 31"N, 80° 30' 30"W, and 25° 45' 31"N, 80° 32' 45"W. A systematic ground search of these large and diffuse aggregations was never undertaken because several hundred endangered Wood Storks (*Mycteria americana*) were nesting there. Adult spoonbills were also seen carrying nesting material and making regular trips into the L-67 colony (25° 57' 20"N, 80° 33' 55"W) during the first week of June. On 5 June, a large nestling spoonbill was seen from an aircraft at the L-67 colony, but 1.5 hours of observation of the area from a portable tower on 6 June revealed no feeding of young or other activity by adult spoonbills. It seems likely that if spoonbills did breed at L-67, there were fewer than 10 nests.

This appears to be the first report of nesting by Roseate Spoonbills in the freshwater Everglades. Survey effort prior to 1970 was probably minimal; during the past 20 years, however, survey effort has been substantial. Aerial counts of the larger colonies have been undertaken during most years in the mid and late 1970s, and systematic aerial surveys of every colony have been made in every season from 1986 through 1994. During at least four years in the late 1970s and all years from 1986 through the present, ground surveys were also made at most of the larger colonies to detect uncommon nesting species. It is likely that nesting by this conspicuous bird would have been noted during these years.

During 1992, exceptional numbers of wading birds bred in the WCAs of the Everglades—more than the preceding 17 years, and between three and four times the average number found in the previous six years (Frederick 1993). The large number of breeding attempts was apparently fueled by unusually abundant food sources. In 1992, both Wood Storks and Great Egrets fed their young large sunfishes (Centrarchidae), and White Ibises fed their young almost exclusively on fish (Frederick 1993), which ibises only catch during exceptional prey density conditions. It seems likely that the high availability of food was responsible for attracting the spoonbills to breed.

Although inland breeding by Roseate Spoonbills has not been reported at any locations in the United States in recent history, both Bent (1926) and Phelps (1914) recorded this species breeding in freshwater colonies. In addition, the species regularly breeds in freshwater areas in other parts of its range. This suggests that Roseate Spoonbills historically nested in freshwater colonies with some degree of regularity. We believe that inland nesting today occurs only under conditions of exceptional food availability in freshwater marshes.

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