

FIRST RECORD OF THE WHITE-FACED IBIS NESTING IN BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR

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The White-faced Ibis (*Plegadis chihi*) is a generalist water bird associated with freshwater wetlands, flooded grasslands, coastal marshes, and areas modified for agriculture and livestock (Ryder and Manry 2020). The species breeds colonially between April and July, building nests on emergent vegetation or low trees and shrubs over shallow water, or directly on the ground on small islands (Ryder and Manry 2020). The breeding range includes portions of central and western North America, and a large portion of South America from Brazil to Argentina (Ryder and Manry 2020). The White-faced Ibis is resident year-round in some areas, and winters from central California through southwestern Arizona, as well as coastal Texas and Louisiana, south to El Salvador, including most of Mexico except the Yucatan Peninsula (Dunn and Alderfer 2017, Ryder and Manry 2020).

The first records of the White-faced Ibis on the Baja California peninsula date back to 1882, and Grinnell (1928) summarized its status there as “irregular in spring, summer and fall.” More recently, in the state of Baja California, the White-faced Ibis has been considered a visitor (Howell et al. 2001) and a common nonbreeding visitor in the Colorado Desert (Patten et al. 2001). Nesting was first confirmed in 2008 at Parque La Amistad and subsequently also at Presa Rodríguez, in and near Tijuana (Erickson et al. 2020). Thus the species is now considered a common resident in the state of Baja California (Erickson et al. 2013). In Baja California Sur the White-faced Ibis is designated as a common nonbreeding visitor (Erickson et al. 2020). In part due to human activity (crops and livestock), its numbers increased in the last decades of the 20th century (Blanco and Rodríguez-Estrella 1998), and it started to occur throughout the year with increases in late November and early May (Carmona et al. 2002). Although an individual was seen carrying a stick at the ponds of the sewage-treatment plant in La Paz on 20 May 2006 (Erickson et al. 2006), and despite the increased presence of this species in Baja California Sur, its nesting had not previously been confirmed.

On 22 June 2021, G. Marrón and L. Marrón found three nests of the White-faced Ibis (Figure 1) at artificial ponds in the Municipal Ecopark La Juventud of La Paz, Baja California Sur (24.108° N, 110.347° W). The ponds had previously been used for the treatment of wastewater but in 2020 were made into parkland designated by the municipal government for recreation and the preservation of green areas (Billings et al. 2021). The same day G. Marrón and L. Marrón saw 21 White-faced Ibis in the ponds, including the nesting birds.

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FIGURE 1. One of the three nests of the White-faced Ibis found in the ponds of the Municipal Ecopark La Juventud in La Paz, Baja California Sur, 22 June 2021.

Photo by Gerardo Marrón

The ponds are three interconnected water bodies totaling 12.5 hectares. Along the dikes that separate these ponds and on their shores, grows vegetation (*Parkinsonia* spp., *Lycium* spp., and *Tamarix aphylla*) that generates shelter and provides food resources to the local fauna.

During the morning of 22 June 2021, we found the three nests on an islet formed by sediment in the third pond. The nests were separated by less than 20 m from each other and 50 m from the dikes. We observed an adult bird in breeding plumage in each nest, and the birds remained on the nests the entire time that we were in the area (approximately 1.5 hours). The observations were made with a telescope through a 32x eyepiece to avoid disturbing the nesting adults. G. Marrón and Carmona visited the area again on 3 July to monitor the nests, but the previous days' rains flooded the ponds, causing the water level to rise above the islet. The nests were inundated and lost. On 3 July we found 35 White-faced Ibis in the ponds.

On 23 June 2022, Carmona and G. Marrón visited the site again and found three nesting White-faced Ibises in the second pond. The birds were sitting on the nests incubating or brooding, but because of the position and distance of the nests, no eggs or chicks could be observed.

This record of the White-faced Ibis nesting in the Municipal Ecopark La Juventud increases the number of native species with probable or confirmed breeding in Baja California Sur to 150 (Erickson et al. 2020). For these ponds, the total number of species of aquatic birds with confirmed nesting is now 12 (Carmona et al. 1999, Castillo-Guerrero et al. 2002, Sauma et al. 2005, Zamora-Orozco et al. 2007).

The distribution and population of the White-faced Ibis declined in the 1960s and 1970s, as a result of habitat loss and degradation, pesticide pollution, and probably hunting during migration and winter (Ryder 1967, King et al. 1980, Ryder and Manry 2020). However, in the last 40 years populations appear to be increasing (BirdLife International 2016), which has been evidenced in places such as San Diego County,

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California, and the Salton Sink, where the number of nests found and colonies established also increased (Patten et al. 2003, Unitt 2004) in the late 20th century, although there are no more published indicators of that growth subsequently. The increase in population and breeding distribution has reached Baja California Sur, where the abundance of the White-faced Ibis increased in the last decades of the 20th century (Carmona et al. 2002) and is reaffirmed with the nesting documented here.

Given the increase of the White-faced Ibis in summer in the La Paz region (Carmona et al. 2002), it is possible that the species is nesting in other areas that have not yet been discovered. So to determine the current size of the nesting population of this species in Baja California Sur it will be important to search habitats such as farming areas, coastal wetlands, oases, and other water-treatment plants, mainly in the municipalities of La Paz and Los Cabos, where the resources necessary to maintain year-round populations are found (Blanco and Rodríguez-Estrella 1998).

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