

Ibises of the Upper Texas Coast

By Celeste Silling

Here in coastal Texas, we are fortunate to have a wide variety of bird species that inhabit or pass through our area. Some of the most common and easily identifiable birds on the coast are ibises. Ibises are a group of wading birds with long legs and long downcurved bills. They belong to the family Threskiornithidae and usually inhabit wetlands, forests, and plains. These birds have an interesting natural history, and are some of the most culturally significant birds in the world!

According to historians, ancient Egyptians believed that the ibis was one manifestation of Thoth, the god of divine knowledge, magic and writing. Thoth was a prevalent God in Egyptian mythology, and was often depicted as a humanoid being with the head of an ibis. One of the roles Thoth played was in the underworld, where he would weigh the hearts of the deceased against a feather to judge how they had lived their lives on Earth.

Because of their connection to the god, ibises were revered by the ancient Egyptians and considered to be the Earthly form of Thoth. In fact, starting in about 1100BC, there was a long period of Egyptian history in which ibises were mummified as an offering to Thoth. This became such a common practice that several million of the birds were killed and mummified for the practice. They were placed in pairs in urns underneath cities all along the Nile river.

The species of Ibis that the Thoth depictions were based upon was the African Sacred Ibis. This particular bird went extinct in Egypt in the mid 19th century but we can still see similar species all over the world today. As of now, there are 29 extant (living) species of ibis and 4 extinct species. Of those, three species can be seen here in Texas: the White Ibis, the Glossy Ibis, and the White-faced Ibis.

The White Ibis is easily identified by its white feathers, long pink legs, and long red-black bill. These birds flock together and can often be seen flying overhead in a V-shaped formation, or gathering in wetlands. These are quite common in our area, so they're relatively easy to find!

The White-faced and Glossy Ibises are more difficult to identify, as they look very similar to one another. The White-faced Ibis has maroon-brown iridescent feathers all over its body, with a slight outline of white feathers around its eyes and bill. The Glossy Ibis looks much the same, but without the white. Both of these species can be seen on the Upper Texas Coast, but the White-faced are more common.

Looking at an ibis, it's easy to see why the Egyptians saw them as divine. These birds are beautiful, with their long, elegant beaks and iridescent plumage. So, while we might revere them as gods now, we can certainly still appreciate them. If you have the time, take a trip to your local wildlife refuge, rookery, or wetlands and see if you can't spot a flock of these ancient and awesome birds!