

## GLOSSY IBIS

By Morgan Bulkeley

Mount Washington

OFTEN IT IS luck that makes birding so exciting. In this instance we were not out for birds at all, but simply driving to Bartholomew's Cobble to prepare for the spring opening.

The April 5 morning hinted of spring by an influx of tree swallows strung on some roadside wires, but the truer story seemed to be told by the 40-degree temperature, the frozen granular snow still holding the shadiest places, some ponds firmly iced in and the all-day, sap-seed flurries dusted in on a brusque north wind. The tropics seemed especially remote, but suddenly they were not; they had their own glossy feather-duster to toss in upon the mixed spring scene.

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THE DARK BIRD stood in the edge of a pasture pool not far from the Housatonic River north of Ashley Falls. Its body was crow-sized but balanced on long legs and graced with a long neck. First thought was of a little green heron, but no; the much longer bill was prominently down-curved like that of a curlew. The bird dabbled leisurely in a few inches of water, while we dipped frenziedly into all the bird portraits in memory to identify it. It had to be a glossy ibis, out of the tropics into the snow-melt of a New England April, and only 100 feet away!

It waded slowly and sedately nearer probing in fastidious fashion in the shallows, occasionally raising some morsel to swallow. The feathering was lustrous and metallic, the fore-parts a deep

reddish - chestnut and the wings and tail a burnished green-black with purple reflections. Such a once-in-a-lifetime bird was too unbelievable to go unshared and unconfirmed.

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AT THE RISK of not seeing it again we sped for our nearest field companion who fortunately was at home. In about six minutes we were back, and the ibis was still there, posing and primping unself-consciously as a southern belle, as though the icy pool at its feet were not a hundred-foot mirror at all. It preened sienna breast feathers and henna hackles, the conveniently decurved bill working upward as far as an arched neck would permit. Then it resumed the deliberate stalking and dabbling.

Presently, without cause for alarm, it lifted and flew with neck and legs outstretched, on rapidly beating wings over the nearby cows, past a weathered barn cupola, northward, disappearing behind a pine-clad ridge where three turkey buzzards circled. We followed hopefully but never saw the ibis again. There were miles of Housatonic meanders and oxbows for refuge.

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BIRD BOOKS indicate that the glossy ibis is properly an old-world bird widely distributed from Mediterranean countries through the tropics and subtropics of Africa to China and Australia. In this hemisphere it breeds sparingly in the West Indies, Cuba and Florida whence it wanders accidentally or driven by storms to western or northern states. A scattering of these birds to the northeast occurred in 1850 and 1878 and then not again until the 1920s.

Perhaps reflecting the increasing army of birdwatchers, since 1947 there have been occasional but almost annual sightings of this

ibis and a few recent nestings in Massachusetts, generally along the coast in spring and summer. The odd fact about this first record for inland Berkshire County is that the April 5 date seems to be the earliest spring record by a week for the entire Atlantic seaboard.

This glossy ibis may gather companions and presage a northern trend as the world-roving cattle egret has done lately. On the other hand it may be one of those solo records in bird annals like the fellow wood ibis shot only a few miles away in Seekonk 70 years ago. That bird reposes stiffly in the Boston Museum of Natural History, while this glossy ibis poses exotic as Narcissus in Berkshire swamps.

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THE EGYPTIANS portrayed Thoth, their god of wisdom and learning, as ibis-headed. Mummies of sacred ibises have frequently been found in the ancient crypts of Egypt. The people elevated the ibis to godlike status because it returned to the Nile in time of spring flood and abundance. But what New Englander ever expected his spring to be heralded by an Egyptian god in a Yankee cow pasture?