

# Roseate Spoonbill: First Illinois record

by Travis A. Mahan

Until recently, the status of Roseate Spoonbill (*Ajaja ajaja*) in Illinois remained only hypothetical. Though a likely southern visitor, the records for this species in the state were specimens of questionable origin and hear-say observations. No concrete evidence was present to confirm that this species had naturally made its way beyond the state's borders. Of the two specimens reported in Bohlen (1989), one was not preserved, and the other was of an undetermined origin. Recently, there has been a newly discovered specimen of a Roseate Spoonbill at the Illinois State Museum. The only information known about the source of this specimen is the collector, Ed F. Steinhauer. This particular specimen has promise as a genuine Illinois record given that Steinhauer collected many, if not all, of his specimens from Fayette County. Some interesting species that he gathered from Fayette County include an adult male Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) on 19 June 1916, two Wood Storks (*Mycteria americana*) on 28 July 1898, an Eskimo Curlew (*Numenius borealis*) on 30 March 1894, an immature Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*) on 20 May 1893, one adult male and an immature Passenger Pigeon on 2 October 1892, a rare southern Illinois record for Northern Shrike (*Lanius excubitor*) on 27 March 1896, and a Common Raven (*Corvus corax*) on 1 January 1901 (Bohlen 1989). Ironically, Fayette County is the location that provided Illinois its first confirmed record of a Roseate Spoonbill.

On Sunday, 22 June 2003, I discovered a first-year Roseate Spoonbill in Fayette County near the city of Vandalia. My initial sighting



*A first-year Roseate Spoonbill feeds in the flooded cornfield near Vandalia in Fayette County. 25 June 2003. Photo by Travis A. Mahan.*

took place around 4:45 p.m. when I was driving home after a long day of birding in southern Illinois. In fact, I was returning from a successful trip to Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge for the Fulvous Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna bicolor*), another species typically associated with the Gulf Coast states of the southern US, which was previously discovered by two refuge staff members. While driving north on Route 51 just south of Vandalia, I noticed a medium-sized white bird in the middle of a distant field of corn. This field was later measured to be more than 300 yards away. I thought the white bird would probably turn out to be a Great Egret (*Ardea alba*) when viewed through the binoculars, but there was the possibility that something else was lurking in this flooded field. There had been quite a few reports of wandering Black-necked Stilts (*Himantopus mexicanus*) throughout central and southern Illinois earlier in the season, so I thought it was worth checking the area. After pulling to the side of this well-traveled section of Route 51, I first looked at the

“white” wader through my binoculars. I noticed instantly that it was something good because it fed with sweeping motions of its bill. My initial reaction was that it could be a White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*). I had seen many White Ibises feeding in this manner in Florida the previous summer, but a view through the spotting scope was necessary. As soon as I saw the bird through the scope, I noticed PINK! In an excited frenzy, I arranged my digital camera on the spotting scope for a photography session. I was only able to take a single photograph before the spoonbill walked behind a tall section of corn. The picture was greatly affected by the distance and heat aberration, but the pink coloration and a hint of a spoon-shaped bill was evident.

Luckily, I had my wife's cell phone with me, so I called the only two birder numbers I had in memory. Myrna Deaton received the first call, and Dan Kassebaum was next on the list. The information was spread to others by phone, and the sighting was listed online. Soon after the calls were made, a territorial Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) flushed the Roseate Spoonbill from its retreat. The spoonbill flew north and appeared to land beyond Route 40, which intersects Route 51. I conducted a limited search for the bird in a section near Route 40, but I was unable to locate it even in potentially good habitat. I thought it had either flown to an inaccessible section of the Kaskaskia River or, worse yet, that it might have departed for good. I drove back to Route 51 to wait for the others to arrive. Myrna was the first to arrive and receive the ill news of the spoonbill's flight. We used FRS radios to keep in contact