

# First documented nesting record for Anhinga in Illinois

by Matt McKim-Louder

Kennicott (1854) stated that the Anhinga (*Anhinga anhinga*) was quite common in Illinois in June in the Cache River Bottoms near Cairo, and Cahn (1930) listed the Anhinga as a bird of the cypress swamps in southern Illinois. And Although described as a common summer resident in extreme southern Illinois during the late 1800s by Ridgway (1895), there are no specific records of Anhinga nesting in Illinois (Cory 1909; Bohlen 1989).

Following an apparent population decline, other observations over the following century were usually limited to sporadic single-day sightings. These relatively few observations led Robinson (1996) to classify Anhinga as “very rare” in southern Illinois. Most Anhingas seen in Illinois today are likely spring overmigrants and post-breeding wanderers from the closest known current breeding colonies in western Tennessee (Nicholson 1997).

However, given the above statements from Kennicott and Cahn, it should likely be no surprise that Illinois’ first documented nesting for Anhinga came from the largest tract of cypress swamp in Illinois, along the Cache River.

On 1 May, 2009, several observers saw an Anhinga soaring over a bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) swamp adjacent to the Lower Cache River Access near Perks, Illinois (Stotz 2009). Similar to the few exceedingly rare spring observations of Anhinga (Robinson 1996), this individual may have been regarded



An adult Anhinga sits on a nest in Johnson County, 25 June 2009.

Photo by Matt McKim-Louder.

as an overmigrant. However, while walking near the Lower Cache River Access on 23 May, 2009 I watched a large black bird fly over the swamp. From the canoe launch, I was only able to observe the silhouette of the bird as it began to soar above the swamp. After a few moments, I noticed that the bird was followed by three other individuals. The long neck, long rectangular wings and long triangular tail of each bird led me to identify them as Anhingas. After about five minutes of circling, I detected two more individuals. All six birds continued to circle above the swamp for about ten minutes before soaring out of sight.

I returned to the Lower Cache River Access on the morning of 26 May and set out into Buttonland Swamp in a kayak. Within a few minutes, I observed three Anhingas flying just over the trees. Although these birds were much closer than my previous encounter, I was still only able to examine the silhouettes of each individual. Once I returned to the canoe launch, I was provided with fairly low and unobstructed views of two circling birds.

This observation allowed me to finally discern plumage characteristics indicating that one bird had a dark neck (male) and the other had a tan neck (female). Over the next few months, multiple observers reported soaring Anhingas from the Lower Cache River Access and surrounding areas (Stotz 2009). Subsequent searches in Buttonland Swamp yielded no detection of nesting activity.

While conducting a Prothonotary Warbler (*Prothonotaria citrea*) survey by kayak in a large cypress-tupelo swamp located in Johnson Co. on 25 June, I saw a large dark bird take off from a low perch. I quietly followed it and was able to see the bird land on a low branch just over the water. With binoculars I was able to distinguish the tan neck and white wing coverts of an adult female Anhinga. I then began searching the area for signs of nesting and heard the distant sounds of a heron rookery. At the edge of this immense rookery, I observed the large stick nests of Great Egret (*Ardea alba*) and Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) within the tupelo (*Nyssa aquatic*) canopy. After moving approximately 20 m toward the interior of the rookery, I watched an Anhinga fly out of a tree where another perched in an