

# Roseate Spoonbill

*Platalea ajaja*

There are six species of spoonbill in the world. The Roseate Spoonbill is the only one with pink plumage and is the only spoonbill species found in the Americas.

Although Roseate Spoonbills are almost three feet long with a wingspan of around four feet, they only weigh three to four pounds.

Spoonbills are highly social birds that tend to breed and travel in groups. Like ibis, spoonbills fly with their necks outstretched, alternating groups of stiff, shallow wing beats with a glide.

Thanks to conservation efforts, the Roseate Spoonbill has recovered significantly from near-decimation during the plume-hunting era.

The pink primaries of the Roseate Spoonbill were highly prized for use in the construction of ladies' fans at the turn of the century. This made spoonbills one of the favorite targets of the plume hunters who decimated so many other species of wading birds.

By the 1930's, the once thriving Florida population had dropped to an historic low of 30 to 40 breeding pairs, nesting only in a few small colonies on the keys of Florida Bay. Once they gained full legal protection from hunting, the species began to rebound and there are now over a thousand pairs nesting in Florida.

The spoonbill sweeps its bill from side to side close to the bottom of the water as it steadily walks through the water. The sweeping motion creates little whirlpools of water that trap prey inside them. When the spoonbill feels a prey item in its bill, it snaps the bill closed, pulls the prey out of the water, and swallows it. The spoon-shaped bill allows it to sift easily through mud.

Although the diet includes a number of both plant and animal species, small fish comprise

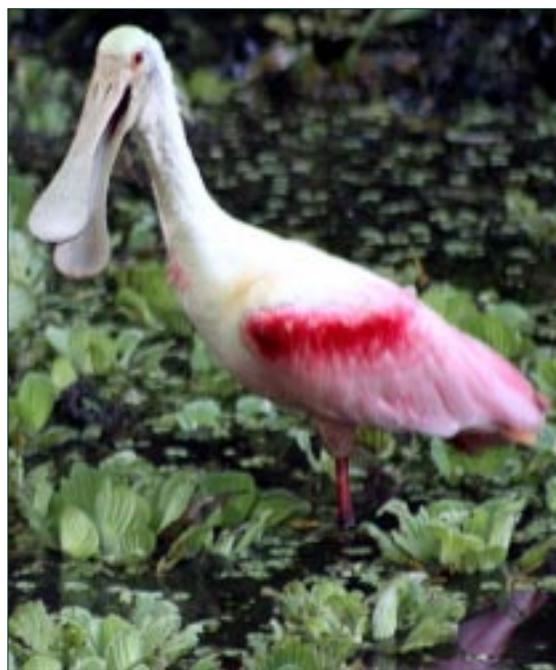
roughly 85% of the diet. The rest is made up of small aquatic organisms like shrimp, mollusks and aquatic insects that lurk close to the muddy bottom, along with a number of aquatic plant species. Spoonbills feed on small prey usually ignored by larger waders.

Like the American Flamingo, the spoonbill's pink color is diet-derived from the pigment canthaxanthin which comes from algae consumed by crustaceans the spoonbills prey upon. The pink coloring leads many tourists to think they saw a flamingo.

Breeding in the United States is restricted to coastal Texas, southwestern Louisiana, and southern Florida. Their breeding range extends south from Florida to Argentina and Chile. They inhabit marshes, swamps, ponds, and rivers within their range, feeding in both fresh and saltwater wetlands.

Most spoonbills do not breed until they enter their third year. Courtship displays include ritualized exchanges of nest material, dancing and bill clapping. Copulation occurs at the nest site.

The female builds a strong cup nest of sticks and twigs utilizing materials brought to her by the male. The Florida population prefers to nest in trees, especially mangroves in coastal areas and



sometimes in conjunction with Wood Storks and herons. In the past, spoonbills have nested with storks in some of the Corkscrew colonies.

The Texas and Louisiana populations often nest on the ground in offshore island mixed colonies with gulls, terns, and herons.

The female lays from two to five whitish eggs with brown markings. Incubation takes 22 to 24 days, with both parents sharing the incubation duties.

The newly hatched chick appears to be mostly pink skin with a sparse covering of white down and an orange bill, legs and feet. Immature birds have white, feathered heads and the pink of their plumage is paler.

The parents feed the chick by dribbling regurgitated material into their upturned bills. At one month of age, the partially feathered chicks begin to exercise by moving about in the branches surrounding the nest. They fledge at six weeks of age.

## SPOONBILL TIDBITS

- The collective noun for spoonbills is *bowl*.
- The bills of spoonbill chicks are straight; the spoon shape grows as the chick develops.



An adult feeds a young spoonbill during a drydown at the north lake.