



## White Ibis and Scarlet Ibis by Carol Ellis

The Scarlet Ibis has a long, curved bill which it uses to probe in the mud for insects, crustacean, frogs and fishes.

As a loyal Florida Gators football fan, I always root for the Gators and anyone playing against Florida State. It's never easy watching your favorite team on a losing trajectory, especially after living through their glory years, including National Championships in 1996, 2006 and 2008.

So when in 2025 University of Miami defeated Florida State football team, I rooted for the Miami Hurricanes. When Miami found itself in the 2026 National Championship, I was leaning toward Miami, but open to Indiana whose quarterback Mendoza has deep Miami family ties, and is a very good guy. It was a good game, ending with Indiana winning after intercepting a Miami pass, stopping a Miami scoring drive. Not particularly fond of the Hurricanes quarterback, I figured the good guys won.

The Miami Hurricanes mascot is the White Ibis named Sebastian. Though Sebastian looks a bit like a duck, an ibis is a way better mascot than a "hurricane." What kind of dance would a hurricane do? Would it run around and expel wind?

The mascot was chosen by the student body in 1926. According to legend, the ibis exhibits bravery (or stupidity) as it is the last bird to depart the area in advance of a hurricane. As the storm passes the ibis is the first to reappear, exhibiting resilience. The ibis is often called the hurricane bird, or the storm bird, as they keep an eye on the weather. They are an unofficial storm warning system, especially when you see a lot of them flocked together.

The White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*) is the most numerous wading bird in South Florida and in the Everglades. It

is found from the southern half of the US East Coast (Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia), along the Gulf Coast states (Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas) and south through most of the Caribbean coastal regions of Central America. Their breeding range runs along the Gulf and Atlantic Coast, and the coasts of Mexico and Central America.

The White Ibis doesn't mind being in urban settings. It is becoming more of a suburban bird, and can be found almost everywhere the Florida Keys, Homestead, Redlands, Naples, road margins, artificial ponds, downtown Miami, and, yes, at the University of Miami campus where they congregated long before there was population in Miami to attend one.



Juvenile and mature ibis.

The ibis' call sounds like a foghorn... nothing pretty about it. They croak and quack, like a duck with nasal congestion. They walk in shallow pools, slowly with their heads down, sweeping their bill from side to side, looking for crabs,



Ibis are social birds, traveling in groups. They are spooked by my presence and the camera.



A flock of mature White Ibises.

## White Ibis and Scarlet Ibis... CONTINUED - Photos by Carol Ellis



Like bookends, these scarlet Ibises are residents at the Brevard County Zoo.

crustaceans, marine worms, frogs, fish and other wetland creatures. They traverse backyards and road shoulders, probing as they go, capturing by touch worms and insects found in the ground cover.

Thousands nest annually on a small island at Crandon Park near Key Biscayne. In the morning and evening you can see them flying overhead, heading to and from their feeding grounds in yards and parks. Within eye and earshot of a bustling populated Miami, these ibis are a testament to adaptiveness.

Adult White Ibises are easy to recognize by their bright white feathers, pinkish-red bill, and curved posture. Immature White Ibises are brown with a white belly.

There is another ibis who is cousin to the White Ibis called the Scarlet Ibis. The Scarlet Ibis (*Eudocimus ruber*)

looks exactly like the White except it is bright red, and is the only shorebird with red coloration in the world. It is the national bird of Trinidad and Tobago. It is numerous in Central and South America, and the Caribbean.

The Scarlet Ibis is red because they eat a lot of red crustaceans. I photographed the Scarlet Ibis at the Brevard Zoo in Melbourne, Florida. The aviary there is 20 foot tall and 4,000 square foot, and visitors walk among the birds as they wade in ponds, and roost in trees within the enclosure.

Natural threats to the ibis include jaguars (haven't seen too many of them lately...unless you are referring to the vehicle) and birds of prey. A greater threat is due to population growth and loss of habitat, though they are adapting.



Historically, Everglades wading birds were for the most part White Ibises. Now an urban bird — the White Ibis has adapted to grassy parks, golf course fairways and suburban backyards — and yes, to the University of Miami campus in Coral Gables.



Juvenile White Ibises walk slowly with their heads down, probing for insects and earthworms amongst the garden greenery.



Reflection of a juvenile White Ibis.



Juvenile and mature ibis

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Currently a Master Gardener volunteer, Carol has a degree in Journalism from the University of Florida and is the resident photographer /artist at Ocean Reef Club.

