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## Roseate Spoonbill *Ajaia ajaja*

This is the only species of spoonbill found in the Western Hemisphere. Its flattened, spatulate bill, specialized feeding technique, and remarkable pink plumage make it unique among Florida's waders. Roseate Spoonbills occur from coastal Florida, southwestern Louisiana and Texas south to Brazil, Argentina and Chile, including the Bahamas, Greater Antilles, Mexico and northern South America.

**Habitat.** Roseate Spoonbills are primarily nocturnal and crepuscular (dawn and dusk) feeders and favor protected flats and tidal creeks during falling tides. Sweeping their bills back and forth like scythes, they capture small fish, crustaceans, and insects. When severe dry seasons cause falling water levels in freshwater wetlands and retention ponds, spoonbills may regularly exploit inland foraging areas near the coast.



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Breeding occurs on small mangrove keys or artificial dredged-material islands along the coast. In recent years, occasional nesting attempts have also been found in the freshwater Everglades. Nests are bulky structures of sticks, lined with finer materials, and are placed beneath the tree canopy. Ground nests are known in Texas, but not in Florida (White et al. 1982). Eggs are large and creamy-white, irregularly spotted with brown. Incubation lasts 22 to 23 days, with both sexes sharing the incubation duties (White et al. 1982, Ehrlich et al. 1988). The young fledge at about 6 weeks of age, but are fed by their parents at the natal colony for 3 to 4 weeks longer.

**Seasonal Occurrence.** Nesting takes place from November through February in Florida Bay and from February through June at Tampa Bay and Merritt Island. Postbreeding dispersal proceeds northward to Fernandina Beach (Nassau County) on the Atlantic Coast and the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge on the Gulf Coast, with small flocks (up to 200+ birds at Sanibel Island) remaining in quiet mangrove coves and other secluded habitat until the arrival of autumn cold fronts. A few observations suggest winter movements to Cuba as well.

**Status.** The Roseate Spoonbill is an uncommon and local bird of the coastlines of central and southern Florida. Prior to the plume trade of the 1880s, spoonbills ranged inland north at least to Lake Okeechobee (Howell 1932). Thereafter, however, the population was greatly reduced, and by the 1930s the state's population reached its time low of perhaps 15 breeding pairs (Allen 1942). Since then, numbers have slowly increased. The population peaked at nearly 1,300 pairs in the late 1970s, then apparently declined in the early 1980s (Powell et al. 1989, Robertson et al. 1983). By 1992, it was estimated that approximately 900 pairs nested annually in Florida; the current population (1995 to 1996) is estimated at 1,000 to 1,100 pairs (Smith and Breining 1988; Bjork and Powell 1994; R. T. Paul, unpubl. data). The Roseate Spoonbill is listed as a Species of Special Concern by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission [editor: now Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (Wood 1991)].

Richard T. Paul

Sponsored by Martha Sheets

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