

BIRDWATCHING

TROPICAL TRAVELER TURNS HEADS IN IVY



PHOTO BY KADALI

Roseate spoonbill's arrival confuses experts

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The Daily Progress

Summer is starting with serendipity for residents of Ivy who have been delighted to catch glimpses of a tropical visitor who's more likely to hang out in Florida, Louisiana and the Gulf of Mexico.

Wildlife enthusiast Denise Karaoli said she first noticed the roseate spoonbill on June 17, fishing quietly in the company of herons, ducks and Canada geese at the marshy edges of a neighborhood pond. After realizing that the bird had joined the group, she said she took some photos and contacted the Wildlife Center of Virginia.

"The bottom line is, 100%, she's lost," Karaoli, who has nicknamed the roseate spoonbill Rose, told The Daily Progress. "But she seems very happy. She's fishing, and the other day, she was bobbing up and down in the water. She looks like she's eating and playing."

The roseate spoonbill, known by the

Latin name *platalea ajaja*, is related to ibises and makes itself at home in coastal marshes and lagoons. As the spoonbill nests in colonies, it's no surprise to see it hanging out with other birds.

A roseate spoonbill's typical shrimp diet imparts a vivid pink hue to its feathers, ergo roseate; it's the same phenomenon that occurs in flamingo populations. However, shrimp are not often to be found in the ponds and lakes that dot Central Virginia.

So the spoonbill's diet is different in Albemarle County, which is reflected in the more muted pink hues of its plumage.

"Since it's an adult, normally its diet would give it brighter colors," Karaoli said. She said she has not figured out where the spoonbill is nesting, but she notices it feeding and playing during the afternoons.

"We have fish; we have the greens. We have everything she needs at the moment," she said. "It's a very lively lake, with plenty of underwater grasses."

Karaoli said she and her neighbors "do everything we can to maintain the biome," as sightings of breathtaking birds are both educational and awe-inspiring. "Living here on the lake, we have everything from eagles to egrets."

Alex Wehrung of the Wildlife Center of Virginia said there's no way of knowing how long the guest is likely to stay.

"Central Virginia is generally not a stop on their migration," Wehrung told The Daily Progress. "This could be a migratory bird that got blown off course. It was disrupted in some way from its migratory route. Why is it here in the first place? We'll probably never know, in reality. It might just be one of those mysteries."

He said such "wayward migrants" such as this spoonbill can end up off course for a variety of reasons, such as illness, injury — and inexperience.

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"A younger bird that doesn't have the expertise an older bird might have" can get lost — a rookie migration mistake — or lose its way in a storm or other severe weather event, Wehrung said.

Karaoli said she has noticed what appears to be a dime-sized chip on the bird's distinctive bill, "but it looks like it's healing," she said, adding that she hasn't noticed any problems with wings, feet or flight.

It's likely that the spoonbill is gathering its strength to resume its travels, Wehrung said. In the meantime, it seems content to feed and rest in the company of

green herons, great blue herons and other species with "long, skinny legs, long bills and long toes," he said. "It is extremely natural and normal to display these foraging behaviors next to other wading birds."

There's no telling how long the roseate spoonbill will continue its Virginia vacation. While the bird lingers by the pond, Wehrung recommends admiring it from a distance.

There's some risk of predation by coyotes or bobcats, but "the biggest threat this spoonbill is facing, in terms of its safety and well-being, is humans," Wehrung said. "One of the best pieces of advice is to let wild animals be wild. Never get too close to take a photo, and never, never use food as bait.

If a bird is getting free handouts, it has no reason to leave."

The spoonbill does not appear to need any veterinary help or intervention at the moment, but Wehrung said Karaoli did the right thing by contacting the center right away.

"Our front desk staff answers the phone seven days a week, every day of the year, for this reason," Wehrung said. "If you find yourself in a situation like this, you can always call us."

For information about migratory birds, other wildlife and constructive ways to respond to new arrivals in your neighborhood, go to wildlifecenter.org.

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