

## HAND-REARING THE SCARLET IBIS

*Eudocimus ruber*

By RICHARD HUGHES and ANDREW OWEN

(Padstow Bird Gardens, Cornwall)

The Scarlet Ibis is approximately 21-27 in (0.53-0.69 m) in length, the males being slightly larger. The general plumage colour is bright scarlet but this tends to fade to a paler red in captivity. The primaries are black, legs and facial skin red, eyes dark and bill horn coloured (black in the breeding season).

It is found in the mangrove swamps, estuaries and mud flats on the north-east coast of South America and Trinidad. It feeds on fish, frogs, crabs and other crustaceans which it probes for in the mud with its long bill.

### *Housing and feeding*

Five individuals are housed in a large flight measuring 40 x 20 x 20 ft (12.19 x 6.09 x 6.09 m) together with a pair of Violet Plantain-eaters, Red-headed Laughing Thrushes and Black-winged Stilts. Our group consists of one breeding pair, an old male and a second pair which have become established this year (1986), the female of which was hand-reared here in 1983. This article supplements the information given by Kevin Evans on that achievement (*Avicultural Magazine*, Vol. 89, 4:215-217).

The flight is attractively planted with *Leycesteria formosa*, various conifers and a large forsythia bush (approximately 15 ft - 4.57 m) which forms the main nesting site for the Ibis. Two concrete ponds are situated in the flight in which the Ibis regularly bathe and wash their food.

They are fed on a diet of chopped, day-old chicks, Flamingo Pellets, ox heart and live food. They also probe in the soil for earthworms and occasionally catch the odd frog or Slow Worm during the summer months.

### *Breeding*

The breeding season usually commences in mid-spring (depending on the weather) with the breeding birds pairing up and spending a lot of time together, away from the rest of the group. When in breeding condition the colour of the beak changes from pinkish horn to black and the overall plumage becomes a brighter red. Prior to nest-building the male can be seen collecting and carrying twigs and other vegetation. These are sometimes carried to the female and copulation soon follows, often on and around the prospective nest-site. This is observed regularly from about a

week before nest-building commences.

If the weather is mild, large amounts of twigs are placed in the aviary. The male selects a beakful of suitably sized twigs and then carries them to the waiting female which constructs the nest. The comparatively small nest (approximately 12 in in diameter - 0.30 m) is completed within about three days. This is lined with clumps of grass and green leafy twigs. We have found that the Ibis prefer to build their own nest in the forsythia as opposed to using the artificial nesting sites, baskets, etc.

The clutch of 2-3 eggs is normally laid within a couple of days after completion of the nest. The eggs, which are laid every 48 hours, vary in colour from pale sky blue with slight brown speckles to dull grey-green with heavy brown blotches.

The first egg of the clutch of three was laid on 30th April 1986. The female carries out the majority of the incubation, which begins from the laying of the first egg, whilst the male remains close at hand. Occasionally the male carries up food for the female and fresh greenery to reline the nest.

Over the previous two seasons, chicks have hatched only to be thrown out of the nest shortly afterwards. It was therefore decided to remove the first clutch of eggs for hand-rearing. These were taken at the 18th day of incubation.

#### *Artificial incubation and hand-rearing*

The eggs were placed in a small Curfew incubator at a temperature of 100°F at a regular humidity of about 60%. They were turned 180° three times daily up until 21st May when one egg began pipping. The egg hatched the following day after an incubation period of 23 days. The remaining two eggs proved to be infertile.

On hatching the chick's eyes were closed and it was covered in thick, black down; its legs and feet were pink with black toenails. The short, straight beak was pink, tipped with black with a white egg tooth. Tiny black hooks were noticed on each alula.

Its diet consisted of the following:

15 shelled snails

A handful of mealworms

One tablespoonful of Liver Kit-E-Kat and Fish Catkins cat foods

Two crushed calcium lactate tablets

A sprinkling of Vionate

Two tablespoonfuls of water

All this was liquidised and pushed through a fine sieve to remove any fragments of shell. It was then stored in a refrigerator and small quantities



were removed and warmed for feeding.

The first feed was given at 10.30 p.m. - ten hours after hatching - when 1½ ml was fed through a small syringe with soft rubber tubing attached. This was given at hourly intervals for the first day. The chick was fed throughout the night for the first week, the length of time between feeds gradually being increased.

*Day to day record of development*

Day 2: Eyes partially open and is making a shrill squeak whilst being fed. 3 mls is now being fed every two hours.

Day 3: Shuffling around on haunches. Attempting to preen chest.

Day 4: Legs beginning to turn grey whilst feet remain pink. Pin feathers starting to appear under the skin on the wings. Black 'smudge' ring around base of beak.

Day 5: 'Smudge' mark is getting wider. Eyes opening more whilst feeding. Pin feathers erupting on wings and beginning to show beneath the skin on the back. Feet beginning to turn grey. Preening back and chest. Now capable of supporting its head for short periods of time (10 seconds). Faint beginnings of another ring appearing on lower mandible about half-way along the beak.

Day 6: Pin feathers protruding on wings, back and shoulders. Seen pecking at objects for the first time (e.g. kitchen roll). Preening more often. 8ml of food being given every two hours. Missed out at 3.00 a.m.

Day 7: Growing rapidly, legs and feet are now black. Now able to sit up for longer periods. Very inquisitive, often seen looking around, stretching and pecking at thermometer.

Day 8: Standing up, stretching wings and preening underside. Moved him to a larger tray as he is growing so quickly. This is lined with twigs to enable him to grip and exercise his feet. 14 ml being given every 2½ hours.

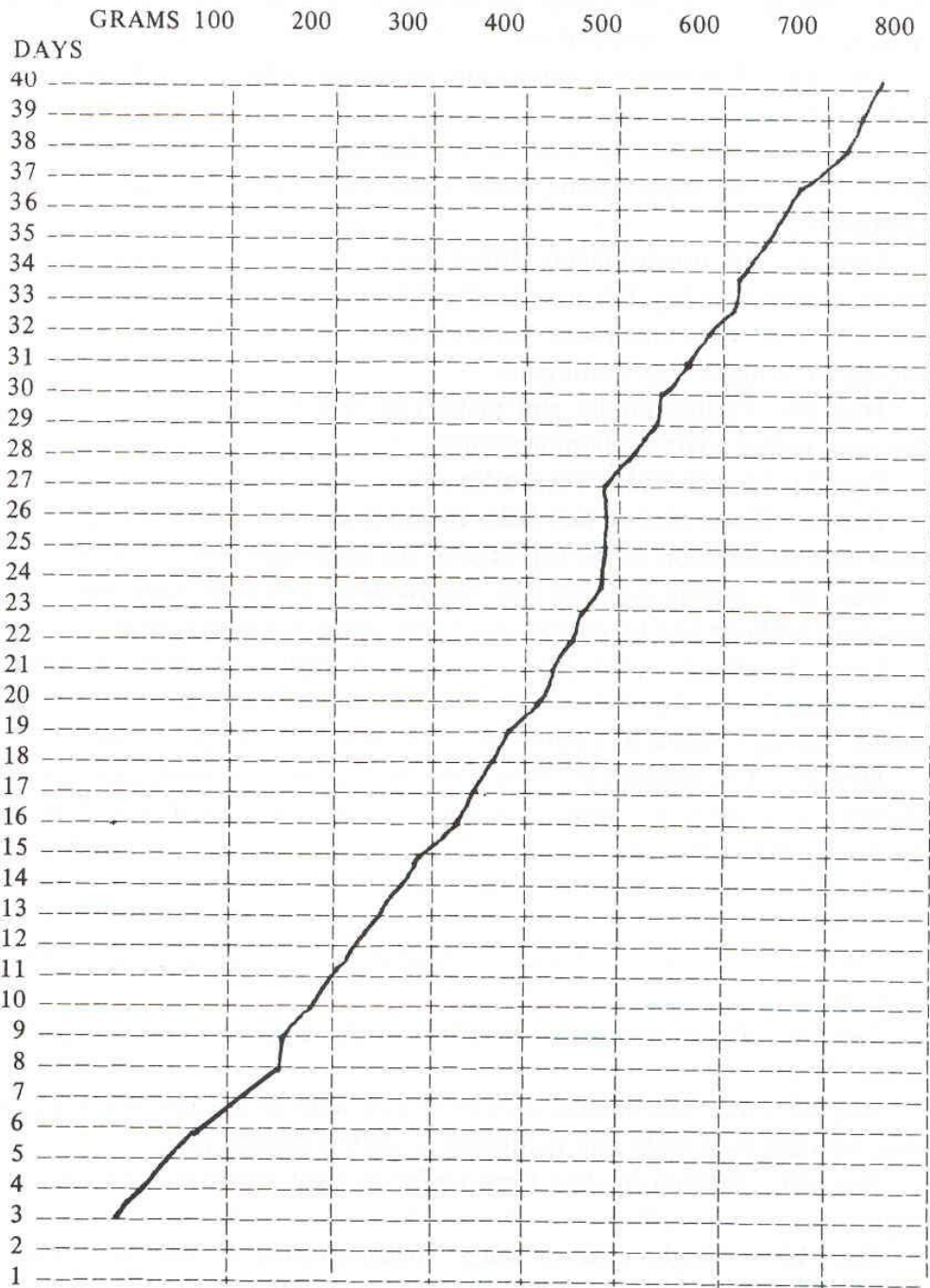
Day 9: Black band across bill becoming more pronounced. Feet are noticeably larger, often pecking at feet. Calls whenever he sees us. Bare skin around the eyes is darker grey. 20-25 ml being fed every three hours. Food is now mixed slightly thicker.

Day 10: Beak longer and slightly downcurved. Pin feathers erupting all over body. Swallowed the rubber tubing which was attached to the syringe at 9.00 a.m. No ill effects noticed. Hopefully it will pass straight through.

Day 11: Tubing passed through whilst being weighed at 6.00 a.m. Pin feather emerging on the front of his neck. Screams incessantly when hungry.

Day 12: Black rings beginning to merge at the base of the beak.

GROWTH RATE OF SCARLET IBIS CHICK  
REARED AT PADSTOW BIRD GARDENS





Feather quills on belly and rump are pale grey.

Day 13: Vanes emerging from tips of quills. Egg tooth is still visible. Raised the lid of the incubator (a) to give more height for him to stretch, and (b) to lower the temperature.

Day 14: Feathers on rump and underside white or pale grey, all others are black.

Day 15: Standing up a lot now. Clambering around the incubator. 30-35 mls now being taken. Food being mixed into a thicker, creamy consistency.

Day 16: Bill much longer. Moved out of the incubator during the day as he is now too big. Put in a cardboard box with a very low perch and his nest tray with the twigs for its feet to grip on. Put back into the incubator at night. Egg tooth gone.

Day 19: Calling loudly and shaking his wings vigorously when being fed, also makes a strange honking noise.

Day 20: Exercising his wings a lot.

Day 21: Given one or two baby (pink) mice with each feed of 40 ml. Now able to climb on to the top edge of the cardboard box.

Day 22: Eating crickets and mealworms, picks up baby mice and pieces of ox heart but he only shakes these about and drops them.

Day 25: Black tail feathers showing through a white rump. Given last syringe feed today. Now being hand fed on ox heart, pieces of skinned chick, flamingo pellets and pink mice. Still only picking up live food.

Day 29: Tail feathers growing well. Beak growing longer, more down curved. Constantly screaming for food. Being fed slightly less often to encourage it to feed itself.

Day 30: Given its first unskinned chick.

Day 32: Brought up his first pellet.

Day 38: Pin feathers showing on head, baby down gradually disappearing.

Day 39: Perching on one leg when resting. Still only picking up live food.

Day 42: Put out into shed as he is now able to fly. Did not feed all day, brought in at night and immediately started begging for food.

Day 43: Picking up live food whilst in shed so he was left out all night.

Day 44: Alright this morning. Began picking at inanimate food. Watched him from outside the shed. Seems as though he is totally weaned.

At the time of submitting this article (September 1987), the young Ibis is almost in full adult plumage and is now living in the flight with the adult birds, where he has been since last summer.