

March 23, 2005

Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission
Imperiled Species Management Section
620 South Meridian St. 6-A
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1600



To Whom It May Concern:

Attached is a **Petition to Nominate the Smooth-billed Ani (*Crotophaga ani*) as a Florida State Listed Endangered Species in Rule 68A-27-003.**

In addition to providing documentation regarding this bird's dramatic decline in Florida and the United States, I also took the liberty of discussing various explanations for this decline, since I (along with many bird enthusiasts) am concerned that rapid human population growth and development of potential ani habitat in South Florida may be a significant factor in this bird's decline. Therefore, I (we) believe that a review of this bird's status should occur as soon as possible.

Please contact me if you require any clarification or additional information.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Robert Showler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and "S".

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**Petition to Nominate the Smooth-billed Ani (*Crotophaga ani*)
as a Florida State Listed Endangered Species
In Rule 68A-27-003
March 22, 2005**

The Smooth-billed Ani (*Crotophaga ani*) is a bird whose historic U.S. range has largely been restricted to southern Florida, even though individuals have been found casually and accidentally further north (Bent, 1940 and Terres, 1980). It is considered common in many parts of its range throughout the Caribbean eco-region, including in the Bahamas. Numerous records during the last 150 years of Smooth-billed Anis in the Dry Tortugas, about 100 miles from Cuba and 70 miles from the rest of Florida (Key West), indicate that this bird is capable of traveling from Cuba to Florida (Birds of America Online). This bird generally prefers "open" habitats, such as weedy and shrubby fields, pastures, farmland, and sometimes residential areas. It isn't commonly found in heavily forested or extensive marshy areas (various sources).

This year-round species appears to have undergone significant population fluctuations during the last 150 years. There are a few records from Louisiana and North Carolina dating back to the late 1800's (Bent, 1940). The bird was reported in low numbers in Florida during the 1800's and early 1900's, with records coming from the Dry Tortugas (1857), Lake Worth (1897), near Melbourne (1901), and Flamingo (1916), followed by other South Florida observations through the mid-1930's (Sprunt, 1932 and Bent, 1940). The first report of breeding comes from Miami in 1938 (Sprunt, 1932 and Terres, 1980).

This species seems to have experienced an increase in population from the late 1950's through the early 1970's, then began to decline rapidly from the 1970's to the present time. National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count records show a high U.S. tally of 1146 birds during the 1971-2 count. Today, Smooth-billed Anis are extremely rare anywhere in the United States, including in Florida. None of these birds were recorded for the 2003-4 Christmas Bird Count in the country (National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count data; see attached); birders have reported extremely low numbers in South Florida during the past two years (Tropical Audubon Society "Birdboard" website reports). Since Christmas Bird Count records show a decline in sightings from 45 to zero birds during the past ten years (a 100% reduction) it seems that this bird should be considered as a state listed endangered species.

Note: due to a relatively low human population in South Florida (and, presumably fewer bird observers and Christmas Bird Counts) during the first half of the 20th Century, observations on Smooth-billed Ani numbers and population trends during this period may not be especially reliable. Perhaps more anis were around than the data suggest. The statement that Smooth-billed Anis have declined significantly during the last three decades, however, should be considered reliable, since the number of observers (such as during Christmas Bird Counts) has actually increased (*American Birds* and *Field Notes*).

Even though it appears that little, if any, research has been conducted to determine the cause of this recent decline, numerous explanations have been proposed.

One of the more popular explanations is that the Smooth-billed Ani's population reduction coincided with cold spells in South Florida. The following statement, referring to anis near Lake Okeechobee, seems to contradict this explanation: "The anis, since coming to this area, have several times survived sub-freezing

weather...records contain the following entries: December 14, 1944--28° F; February 5, 1947--26° F" (Dilley, 1948). The apparent beginning of the increase in this bird's numbers during the late 1950's and early 1960's (National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count data) coincides with two cold spells (winter of 1957-8 and December, 1962), whereas the beginning of the species' decline in the early 1970's doesn't correlate with a notable period of cold weather (McGovern, 2004). While it is true that some of the severest cold weather to hit South Florida in this century was during the 1980's, when ani populations continued to drop, the bird's decline began well before then.

Another natural explanation for the ani's decline--hurricanes--doesn't seem to be reinforced by data either. As ani populations increased from 1957 to 1974 South Florida was hit by no less than five hurricanes. As ani populations began to decrease in the 1970's and 1980's South Florida was struck by only two hurricanes (Barnes, 1998).

Another explanation is possible ingestion of pesticides resulting from this bird's mainly insect diet (Birds of North America Online).

Rapid human population growth and accompanying development throughout peninsular Florida, much of it occurring within the ani's preferred habitat and historic range, may also be suspected as a potential contributor to the bird's decline. From *Birds of Florida*: "Apparently [the ani is] declining as southern Florida continues to develop, and the brushland shrub/scrub habitat is lost" (Alsop, 2002).

Finally, it may be that Smooth-billed anis in Florida and the United States have undergone inexplicable natural population fluctuations for centuries, but it appears that no research has been conducted to investigate this explanation.

Given the Smooth-billed Ani's rapid reduction--to near extirpation--throughout its Florida/U.S range within the past three decades, this bird should be viewed as a strong candidate for extensive research and should be seriously considered as a candidate for the Endangered Species List.



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Historical
Results

**Observation data for Smooth-billed Ani, in US,
Count Years: 1 - 104**

Smooth-billed Ani (*Crotophaga ani*)

Count Number	Number	Number / Party Hr.	Number of Counts Reporting Species	Number of Observations Reporting (s)
1 (1900-01)	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0
3	0	0	0	0
4	0	0	0	0
5	0	0	0	0
6	0	0	0	0
7	0	0	0	0
8	0	0	0	0
9	0	0	0	0
10	0	0	0	0
11	0	0	0	0
12	0	0	0	0
13	0	0	0	0
14	0	0	0	0
15	0	0	0	0
16	0	0	0	0
17	0	0	0	0
18	0	0	0	0
19	0	0	0	0
20	0	0	0	0
21	0	0	0	0
22	0	0	0	0
23	0	0	0	0
24	0	0	0	0
25	0	0	0	0
26	0	0	0	0

27	0	0	0	0
28	0	0	0	0
29	0	0	0	0
30	0	0	0	0
31	0	0	0	0
32	0	0	0	0
33	3	0	1	1
34	0	0	0	0
35	0	0	0	0
36	0	0	0	0
37	0	0	0	0
38	0	0	0	0
39	0	0	0	0
40	0	0	0	0
41	0	0	0	0
42	0	0	0	0
43	0	0	0	0
44	0	0	0	0
45	0	0	0	0
46	0	0	0	0
47	0	0	0	0
48	0	0	0	0
49	0	0	0	0
50	0	0	0	0
51	0	0	0	0
52	0	0	0	0
53	0	0	0	0
54	0	0	0	0
55	0	0	0	0
56	0	0	0	0
57	16	0.0007	1	20
58	3	0.0001	2	30
59	10	0.001	4	74
60 (1959-60)	65	0.002	4	87
61	105	0.0015	4	104
62	165	0.0026	4	95
63	249	0.0045	5	186
64	338	0.0035	4	176
65	452	0.004	4	229
66	510	0.0035	7	327
67	783	0.0051	6	286
68	750	0.0043	5	262
69	879	0.0076	7	281
70 (1969-70)	1120	0.0097	14	428
71	1028	0.0083	10	410
72	1146	0.0096	14	530
73	916	0.0078	13	488
74	893	0.0077	15	496
75	997	0.0088	16	626
76	826	0.0068	14	599
77	867	0.0068	15	642

78	522	0.004	15	660
79	361	0.0029	15	670
80 (1979-80)	636	0.0049	15	631
81	535	0.0037	12	551
82	219	0.0019	15	614
83	286	0.0021	12	504
84	252	0.0018	9	390
85	150	0.0011	12	484
86	41	0.0003	10	412
87	149	0.0011	13	517
88	124	0.0009	10	433
89	45	0.0003	8	294
90 (1989-90)	39	0.0003	3	111
91	24	0.0002	7	267
92	63	0.0005	5	184
93	45	0.0004	6	218
94	45	0.0003	4	156
95	20	0.0001	5	226
96	24	0.0002	3	109
97	7	0.0001	3	74
98	24	0.0003	2	60
99	5	0	2	66
100	19	0.0002	3	106
101	13	0.0001	2	67
102	15	0.0002	3	87
103	10	0.0001	2	51
104 (2003-4)	0	0	0	0

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