

THE CATTLE EGRET

by BRIAN GLOVER

The story of the Cattle Egret (*Ardeola ibis*) in Australia is one of considerable interest, and with a definite element of mystery, for its origin is still in doubt.

In 1933 twenty Cattle Egrets were imported from India, and eighteen of these were liberated near Derby, Western Australia in the hope that they would help control the cattle tick. The birds soon disappeared and nothing more was recorded of the species in Australia until 1948 when H. G. Diegnan of the National Geographic—Smithsonian Institution Arnhem Land Expedition observed "hundreds" of Cattle Egrets in the Oenpelli district of the Northern Territory. Although some ornithologists considered that these birds were descended from those introduced in 1933, it is much more likely that they immigrated to Australia at a much earlier date. Hewitt (3) presents evidence that indicates that the birds were present at least as early as 1907, whilst a skin in the South Australian Museum which had originally been incorrectly labelled *Mesophyx plumifera* (i.e. plumed Egret—*Egretta intermedia*), from Queensland, was probably collected late last century (1).

Since 1948 there have been reliable reports of Cattle Egrets from all mainland States, with the notable exception of South Australia—until early 1964 when the species was recorded almost simultaneously from Jamestown in the lower-north, and Port Lincoln on lower Eyre Peninsula.

W. E. Matheson (*in litt.* 11/5/64) reported "... two Cattle Egrets (*Ardeola ibis*) have been seen regularly in the parklands at Jamestown during the last week. They were first seen by a member of the Bird Observers Club about May 5th, although it is probable that they have been here longer. I saw them on May 8th and here is my field description—White birds about 18" high (slightly higher than a cow's knee), legs 9" or 10" long, dark olive green, yellow on the soles of the feet (seen when they are walking); yellow bill, stout, fairly straight; yellow iris. Flight similar to that of a White-faced Heron; in flight the legs project some 6" beyond the end of the tail feathers. The birds feed fearlessly among grazing cattle and one was seen to dart after insects with neck outstretched."

In a later communication (20/5/64), Matheson reported that he and Mr. K. W. Bowen had trapped a Cattle Egret in a mist net and the live specimen had been sent to the South Australian Museum on May 19th for positive identification by the Curator of Birds, Mr. H. T. Condon. The bird was, as was suspected, a Cattle Egret. The Jamestown birds were also reported by Miss C. J. Scott (8).

The Port Lincoln occurrence is reported elsewhere in this issue.

It is probable that Cattle Egrets have occurred, probably only as visitors, on Eyre Peninsula for several years, for two egrets reported by L. Schulze of Warramboe (7) as having taken up residence at a farmer's pig-sties, feeding with the pigs and even going into the pen with them at night—where they were eventually eaten by the pigs, were almost certainly Cattle Egrets.

FIELD IDENTIFICATION:—

By far the most characteristic feature of the Cattle Egret is its association with domestic stock. In the Northern Territory it typically associates with buffalo and cattle, feeding amongst them and darting after insects disturbed by the larger animals, and regularly perching on their backs. In the absence of these ruminants other animals are quite acceptable e.g. in the 1959 invasion of South-Western Australia Cattle Egrets were reported as associating with horses, sheep, pet kangaroos, pigs, fowls and geese, as well as with cows (5). In his television series "On Safari" (ABS2, Adelaide, 27/9/64), Armand Dennis showed scenes of flocks of Cattle Egrets in Surinam (Dutch Guiana), following the plough, as do Silver Gulls in certain areas of South Australia, a practice he had never witnessed in Africa where the Cattle Egret is common.

The size is noticeably smaller than a White-faced Heron (*Ardea novaehollandiae*) and the other small egrets, the bill is shorter and thicker and the legs distinctly shorter. The plumage is white, and in the breeding plumage a strong buff (also described as orange-rufous or orange-yellow) tinge covers the feathers of the head, neck, upper breast and centre of back. Some birds in non-breeding plumage retain a trace of buff coloring, others are pure white.

The bill is yellow and the legs dark, although there is a divergence of opinion amongst observers as to the exact leg color, being described as black, grey, dark olive-green, etc., and with the soles of the feet yellow.

Hewitt (4) who has had considerable field experience of Cattle Egrets gives the following description of the habits of one bird under observation—"When on the alert the bird stood at its full height with its neck outstretched, but when moving among the cattle it adopted the characteristic hunched stance of the species. (In the latter attitude it was at times hard to see in the longish grass). In flight the neck was bent back and the legs extended as is usual with herons. The wings appeared to be more rounded than in other species of egrets and the wing beats were rather slow, the general impression being that the flight was somewhat like that of the White Cockatoo. When on the ground the Egret moved somewhat haltingly, quite unlike other species of egrets." Wheeler (9) remarked that the ambling gait was most noticeable and the hunched appearance most distinctive. The flight was lazy with slower wing beats and the call more muffled and softer than that of other egrets.

Australian Cattle Egrets belong to the South-East Asian form of the species—*Ardeola ibis coromandus* (Boddaert). African birds, *Ardeola ibis ibis* (L.) which also occur in parts of Europe and South-West Asia differ in having the breeding plumage with pinkish-buff to deep orange buff plumes, rather than the rusty-buff of *A. i. coromandus*. The bill and legs are yellow in the breeding season, in some birds becoming orange-yellow, even red. Authorities differ on leg color outside the breeding season—dull yellow, dark green, greenish brown, greenish black, etc. (6) (10).

OTHER EGRETS—

There are five species of all-white egrets in Australia, all except one, the white phase of the Reef Heron (*Egretta sacra*), having been recorded in South Australia. The distinguishing features of these species have been discussed by Condon (1) who also stresses the extreme care that must be taken in attempting to identify any of the smaller species in the field. Field characters are also given by Glover and Schodde (2); some of these now need modifying, and should

only be used as a field guide after comparison with Condon's paper.

One thing that emerges from reading the literature on the egrets is the lack of precise knowledge of the colors of the unfeathered parts of the various species at different stages of their lives. Any persons having the opportunity of handling live egrets or examining birds at close range in the field should take careful notes of the exact coloring of the bill, face, eye, legs (above and below the "knee") and feet (including soles), taking care that apparent leg color is not due to dirt or other adhesions.

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