

## OBSERVATIONS ON THE EASTERN REEF EGRET IN THE EYRE PENINSULA REGION

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Parker *et al.* (1979) regard the Eastern Reef Egret *Egretta sacra* (also known as the Reef Heron) as a species whose status and distribution in South Australia require further study. The only definite breeding localities they list from Eyre Peninsula are The Brothers and Garden (Rabbit) I. in Coffin Bay (based on Mr. D. Barnes' reports in the *S. Aust. Orn.* 24:58 and 25:31). I should like here to set down further details of the occurrence of this species in Coffin Bay, together with brief notes on its occurrence elsewhere in the Eyre Peninsula region.

In the Coffin Bay district the species is fairly numerous (except in winter). It is often encountered in parties of three or four, sitting on moored boats or fishing along the beaches in front of the holiday shacks. When fishing, the bird walks along the water's edge with its wings held fanned over its head. It is generally very quiet and easy to approach there; I once crawled to within 4-5 metres of one (in order to photograph it) as it waited on the beach for a fish to surface.

The species nests regularly on all the islands in Coffin Bay — The Brothers, Garden I. and Goat I. These islands are of low broken limestone, and on them the bird prefers to nest in a small cave, or on a ledge with a screen of Nitrebush *Nitrobaria schoberi* hanging thickly over the front of it. The nest is a bulky affair about two feet across, made from sticks and twigs of Nitrebush. It has a shallow depression in the centre, in which are laid two, sometimes three, pale blue eggs. The mortality rate appears to be fairly high, only one or two chicks from each brood fledging. I have found eggs on Goat I. from September to New Year's Day, and on The Brothers and Garden I. during November and December. On The Brothers,

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Reef Heron nest on Goat I, Coffin Bay



several pairs nest together. Mr. Doug Barnes and I banded chicks in January 1966 and December 1970, but no recoveries have been made so far.

In the Port Lincoln district, odd birds can always be seen on the edge of the town, mostly near Salt Creek. Here, however, they are always timid and hard to approach. There are no definite breeding records from this district, though a nest (recently reported to me) on Round I. near Port Lincoln, placed on the ground beneath a boxthorn bush *Lycium sp.* and containing three pale blue eggs, may well have been of this species. Doug Barnes also reports seeing Eastern Reef Egrets at Searcy Bay, 33° 03'S, 134° 12'E.

Parker *et al.* found indications of post-breeding dispersal in this species. This may occur in the Coffin Bay district, where during two winter visits (July) I saw none at all. In the Port Lincoln district, however, it does occur in the winter months, two sightings (one of a group of three birds) having been made in July 1978.

There seem to be very few references to the occurrence of the Eastern Reef Egret in the Sir Joseph Banks Group. Parker *et al.* list only Spilsby I., but imply that certain reports of White-faced Herons on reefs in this group may be referable to the Eastern Reef Egret. On my own visits to the group I have recorded Eastern Reef Egrets on Sibsey I, English I, Reevesby I, and Kirkby I. The White-faced Heron *does* occur in the Sir Joseph Banks Group, but prefers the interiors of the islands to the shores and reefs.

### REFERENCE

- Parker, S. A., H. J. Eckert, G. B. Ragless, J. B. Cox & N. C. H. Reid. 1979. An Annotated Checklist of the Birds of South Australia. Pt. 1, Emus to spoonbills. Adelaide: S. Aust. Orn. Assoc.

Reef Heron nest on Rabbit I, Coffin Bay

