

Bird Note

Great Egret preying on an Australian Reed Warbler

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On 3 February 2016 while conducting a regular bird survey along the River Torrens between Henley Beach and Tapleys Hill Roads in suburban Adelaide, I observed a Great Egret, *Ardea alba*, in breeding plumage perched on a bulrush island, *Typha* sp., just upstream of the footbridge across the river. On closer observation I realised that the egret had an Australian Reed Warbler, *Acrocephalus australis*, in its bill and it was clear that the warbler was dead, as it did not move at all during the observation period.

The egret had the neck of the warbler in its bill and the lifeless body was hanging limply below. The egret shook the warbler repeatedly and was clearly trying to swallow it but it seemed that the prey was too large. I watched the egret struggle for over five minutes and at one stage it grasped the warbler's body in its attempts to consume the bird. The egret eventually decided that dipping the warbler into the water would make it easier to swallow and five times the warbler was plunged into the river. After about eight minutes the warbler was swallowed head first and I could see the lump moving along the egret's neck. For the first minute or so the egret looked rather uncomfortable and kept its neck elongated, but then retracted its neck. The egret then scratched its neck, preened and drank twice from the river. I left at this stage but did check on the bird on

my return journey. The initial observation was at 0730 hours and at 0940 the egret was still in exactly the same place.

I was surprised to observe the Great Egret eating a bird, but Marchant and Higgins (1990) list their food as "aquatic animals, principally fish but also frogs, insects and small birds". Other records of birds being eaten include Domestic Fowl, Australian Crake, Baillon's Crake, Sacred Kingfisher, Silvereeye and House Sparrow (Marchant and Higgins 1990), some of which are considerably larger than the Australian Reed Warbler. Regrettably I do not know how the egret caught the warbler nor how long the egret struggled to swallow it, except that it took at least eight minutes. Klapste's (1976) observation



**Figure 1. Great Egret photographed at Bolivar
Image Lydia Paton**

of a Great Egret with a dead Australian Crake in its bill is similar to mine in some respects: both prey items were dead on first observation and both prey items were held by their necks. Neither of us saw the capture of the prey but it is reasonable to assume that the prey birds were alive when captured.

Marchant and Higgins (1990) observe that fish >12 cm long were handled with difficulty by Great Egrets at Kakadu in the Northern Territory, which is consistent with my observation of the egret struggling to swallow the 17 cm long reed warbler.

REFERENCES

- Klapste, J. 1976. Spotted Crake as prey of the White Egret. *The Australian Bird Watcher* 6: 164.
- Marchant, S. and Higgins, P.J. (eds). 1990. *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic birds. Volume 1B: Australian Pelican to ducks.* Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

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