

## Observations on the Cattle Egret in Eastern Australia

By J. R. WHEELER, Belmont, Vic.

In recent years the Cattle Egret (*Ardeola ibis*) has been reported frequently in the Northern Territory and Western Australia, but comparatively seldom in eastern Australia.

During a visit to northern Queensland in 1961 I was able to study a small flock of up to 23 birds at Innisfail, and with the R.A.O.U. Field-outing at Grafton in the same year my personal total was 82 birds in the Ulmarra district.

To observe 105 Cattle Egrets for the trip was far above expectations, and indicates a considerable increase in numbers that have been reported previously for eastern Australia, and it is suggested that observers watch for egrets behaving in the manner described in this report.

Queensland sightings of the species are few, and the earliest I can find is that by H. E. Tarr: seven birds at Mt. Isa on August 24, 1952 (Tarr 1952); South Australian Museum: one specimen from Queensland (Hewitt 1960); and Bell (1961) reported a single bird at Innisfail on June 27, 1960.

Observers S. Archer, R. Gill, and the author, at Innisfail on August 6, 1961, found a group of 15 Cattle Egrets associating with dairy cattle on the southern fringe of a very swampy area, half a mile north of the Innisfail railway station. The only access to the area was out of bounds and, in order to obtain a closer view, wading was necessary. The birds were of white plumage, and no orange-buff colouring could be seen at the time. The birds were associating closely with the cattle and three birds were seen to perch on the backs of the animals. The ambling gait of the birds was most noticeable, as they moved forward to feed on insects disturbed by the cattle. The hunched appearance of the birds was most distinctive. On August 7, 1961, other observers included Mrs. Gill and Mrs. Wheeler, when 21 birds were counted. Mrs. Wheeler observed one bird to peck at the lower jaw of the beast it was attending. The cattle were in no way alarmed at the presence of the birds, even when perched on their backs. The birds fed with the cattle until they finished grazing—about noon—and the birds then flew off in one flock to settle in the middle of the swamp to preen and rest.

Numbers of White Egrets (*Egretta alba*), Plumed Egrets (*Egretta intermedia*), and Little Egrets (*Egretta garzetta*) were on the swamp and on a nearby lagoon. None associated with the Cattle Egrets.

On August 31, 1961, the total of Cattle Egrets had grown to 23 and all showed a similar behaviour. The final day of observation of this group was on September 1, 1961, when L. Amiet and the author approached the lessee of the property and, after much explaining of our intentions, we were

permitted to enter the property for a short period only. Twenty-three birds were then in the group and were observed from as close as 150 feet. Only one bird showed any signs of breeding plumage, and in this instance the rear of the head extending down the neck was a faint orange or mustard colour. Compared with the Plumed Egret, which was very common in the area, the size was slightly smaller, the yellow bill was shorter and thicker, the head more thick set, and the legs greyish black. Up to five birds were seen to attend the one beast. The hunched posture was general, except when moving forward to snap up food or when alarmed, when the head and neck were extended fully. As we moved closer to disturb the birds three perched on the backs of cows, whilst others circled overhead. The flight was lazy, with slower wing-beat, and the call more muffled and softer than that of other egrets. As we left the area the birds returned to continue their association with the dairy cattle.

After our departure south Mrs. Gill last reported seeing this group on September 9, 1961, on which occasion eight birds were attending two horses.

The lessee of the property, with whom we discussed the behaviour of these egrets, stated that he had noticed the association for at least two seasons previously, but the birds always left the district at the approach of the wet season.

On the return journey from northern Queensland eight days were spent with the R.A.O.U. Field-outing at Grafton. On October 5, 1961, in the Ulmarra district, 82 Cattle Egrets were observed in breeding plumage. The birds were in three separate groups, two of which associated with cattle and showed similar behaviour to the birds in northern Queensland, whilst the third group fed in a lagoon with no cattle present.

From previous reports of Ulmarra birds by Goddard (1955), Sharland (1957), and Hewitt (1960), it is evident that the local population has increased considerably, and should now be considered as well established in that district.

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