

CATTLE EGRET NESTING IN NEW JERSEY

RUSSELL S. FOWLER

So much has been written and published about the Cattle Egret, *Bubulcus ibis*, since its recorded arrival in British Guiana in 1930 — the first known occurrence in this hemisphere — that I have hesitated to add to the literature on the species. However, the phenomenal increase of the bird's range on the North American continent continues to be an ornithologically newsworthy item, particularly in the Delaware Valley area since the Egret has become a breeding resident here.

The geographical spread of this bird continues to amaze ornithologists, and prompted Alexander Sprunt, Jr., well-known author and staff member of the National Audubon Society, to state in his report to the Smithsonian Institution in 1955: "It's presence here is at once unique and without precedent. At no other time in known history has a bird appeared on the continent of North America and become established as a breeding species without man's assistance." Numerous accidentals from the old world are recorded on our shores but merely as wandering visitors, not taking up permanent residence. There have been a number of theories concerning the presence of this Egret in the new world, but some of the mystery has been lessened by the recent recovery in Trinidad of an old world Egret banded in Spain.

In this part of the continent, since the bird was first observed and identified in Massachusetts in the late spring of 1952, closely followed by its discovery on the MacPherson farm in Cape May County, N. J., its activities have been constantly under surveillance and its prior movements studied. Records show that it was seen near Clewiston, Florida in 1942 by Willard Dilley of the Everglades National Park, but was thought by him at that time to be an escape. The first nesting records were established in May 1953 in the Lake Okeechobee region of Florida; and at least up to and through 1958 the bird has become resident in the Carolinas and Maryland. Now it is a known nester in New Jersey. Since 1952, this old world emigrant has surprisingly increased both in number and extent of its home range.

In the Cape May area, each spring and fall has seen a steady growth in numbers of the Cattle Egret from the original bird in 1952 to the 36 counted in the summer of 1958 on the Audubon Society survey conducted by Robert Allen and Herbert Mills. The Bob Allen survey, incidentally, noted adult

birds carrying nesting material into the Stone Harbor Sanctuary during the period between May 3rd and May 11th; and on July 11th, reported seeing young birds in the tops of the trees.

As late as the spring of 1958, speculation was still rife as to whether these birds were nesting in our area. In fact, even their roosting place had not been determined. After several unsuccessful ventures in locations which seemed most likely, the writer, accompanied by F. Russell Lyons, a past-president of the Cape May Geographic Society and who recently met an untimely death, and Henry Rodberg of the Gloucester Nature Club, set forth early on the morning of July 4th, 1958, determined to resolve the question.

A visit by boat to a small island in the Sound where on July 4th, 1955, this same group recorded the first nesting record in New Jersey of the Glossy Ibis, soon established the presence of the bird they were seeking. In this heavily populated rookery of herons, we were able to find three widely-separated Cattle Egret pairs apparently nesting.

Working as a team through extremely heavy brush, we finally made contact with the nearest of the three probable Egret nests. It was located about eight feet from the ground in the crotch of a bayberry (*myrica*) tree and was constructed in the same loose fashion of twigs and small sticks as the neighboring nests of the other herons and egrets. We were excited, to put it mildly, to find that the nest contained a young bird and two eggs. The eggs, similar in size to those of the Snowy Egret, appeared to differ in shape, being wider at the large end and much blunter on the pointed end. In color, the pale blue was decidedly lighter than the eggs of any of the other herons.

A blind was erected immediately within a reasonable distance, and subsequent visits were made by the writer on successive Saturdays and Sundays. During these visits, the activities of both the adults and the progressive growth of the young birds were recorded on film. The visits of the adults to the nest were always accompanied by a spectacular display of the colorful aigrettes, raised and lowered, and by some small affectionate intertwining of necks, all of which added considerably to the color movies taken.

On my first return visit, three youngsters were observed in the nest with one parent nearby on the top of a bush. The presence of at least one parent bird appeared constant throughout my three-week period of observation.

The method of feeding during the first week appeared to be a radical departure from the usual method of regurgitation. A round black mass, approximately the size of a golf ball and presumably composed of insect material, was deposited in the nest by one of the adults, whereupon the nestlings fed upon it, — a sort of family-style serving. After the first week, the normal regurgitation method of feeding from the parent's mouth was practiced.

At the end of the third week, the young birds were able to claw and scamper about the tops of the adjoining bushes; and our observations were brought to a close.

One of the oddities noticed during my patient waiting periods inside the sweltering hot blind while beset with flies, gnats, and every conceivable insect indigenous to the place, was the total absence in this rookery of both crows and the usual infestation of poison ivy.

Having confirmed this historic nesting, we immediately began negotiations with the owners of the marshland embracing the rookery. While they would not agree to sell, they graciously consented to lease it to us and permit the erection of sanctuary signs. We sincerely hope that our continued surveillance of the area will reduce intrusion and prevent potential vandalism, thus encouraging the permanent occupancy of this well-populated rookery by these new bird citizens of the State of New Jersey.