

THE CATTLE EGRET IN ALABAMA

By BLANCE E. DEAN

Strangely missing from Alabama's new Field Check List, just recently off the press, is the Cattle Egret. A 1956 estimate of the numbers of Cattle Egrets in Florida is 6500 birds. They have been found along the coast from Florida to Texas and north to Newfoundland. One of my friends, Mrs. Amy Baldwin of Chicago, reported finding them in that area in 1953. They must surely be in Alabama. Who will be the first to report one in this state? Below is a brief history and description to aid you in reporting this to our ornithologists.

This immigrant appeared in the Western Hemisphere about 1930. The first specimen was obtained in 1937 in British Guiana. There has been much speculation about how the **Bulbulcus ibis** arrived in South America. Were they brought over as pets by Orientals? Were they escaped from some zoo importing animals? Or did they arrive by wing under their own power? Most authorities are inclined to think they arrived by wing with the aid of wind even though it is about 1775 miles from Africa to South America at the closest points. Since the Cattle Egrets eat live insects a long voyage would be extremely difficult to manage. There is no record of any number being imported for zoos and any having escaped. They are known to be good flyers and wander great distances in the Old World. This species **Bulbulcus ibis** is distributed widely over Europe, Africa, and the Middle East and a sub-species **Bulbulcus ibis coromandus** has spread over India, Japan, and Australia. So the most logical conclusion is that they came under their own power across the Atlantic.

When did they arrive in the United States? Again we do not know the exact time. Willard E. Dilley who is now on the staff of Grand Canyon National Park recalls having seen two in the summer of 1941 or 42 near Clewiston, Florida, but supposed that they were escaped from some zoo. In 1952, in March, Richard Borden, a bird student, took some pictures of egrets and herons in a field of cattle on Eagle Bay Ranch near Lake Okeechobee. Months later he examined his picture more carefully and discovered Cattle Egrets and not the Snowy Egrets as he supposed he had photographed. Our friend, Samuel A. Grimes, made history on May 5, 1953, when he and Glenn Chandler discov-

ered and photographed the first Cattle Egret nest in North America. It was on an island known as King's Bar in Lake Okeechobee at the north end of the lake. The nest was in a rookery with little blues, Louisiana, and Snowy Egrets.

Imagine Roger Tory Peterson going to Europe in 1952 hoping to see and study especially the Cattle Egret only to find that in his absence it had suddenly made its appearance in the United States!

The first specimen collected in the United States, now in the museum of Comparative Zoology of Harvard, was collected by William H. Drury of Cambridge, Allen Morgan, and Richard Stackpole. They had gone out to Erwin Farm at Heard Pond to check a duck, April 23, 1952. As they were preparing to leave Drury saw the heron settle down among some cattle in the field. He had seen them years before in South America. He could scarcely believe his eyes. "Tradition" says there must be a specimen before the authorities will believe a new species can be counted in a state. So they wanted to collect it, but first, they should have Dr. Ludlow Griscom, dean of field ornithologists, see the Cattle Egret. One rushed to the phone and called him. He said "Collect it and take no chances on it escaping." While this went on the bird stuck close by the cattle . . . too near for shooting. . . and after two wild shots flew off to another field. The men searched for it and finally called in the aid of an airplane to assist in locating the bird. After these reports Cattle Egrets began to be seen in many other places.

At the Wilson Society meeting in Cape May, N. J., June 11-14, 1954, a constant trek to the McPherson Farm near by was made by all the members. I am sure most of the group saw the egrets; but, although I left the meetings, or the lunch, or breakfast every time it was reported, I did not succeed in seeing it.

The Identification Characteristics

The Cattle Egret is about 1½ feet high, about the size of little blues and snowys. It has a short, stout, stubby yellow bill and yellow feet (dark in the immature). It has pink eyes with a buff crown, neck, and back; hence the common name "buff-backed heron." Another common name, "cow heron," refers to the habit of close association with cattle. Its food is insects secured when the cattle steps, disturbing the insects; the heron darts forward to catch them. Oc-

asionally, it reaches up and catches something or picks something from the body of the cattle—probably flies or ticks. The cattle do not seem to mind the closeness of the bird. Alexander Sprunt, Jr., writing in a special report for Smithsonian Institute "The Spread of the Cattle Egret" says, "One mannerism never observed in any other heron is a kind of weaving. The bird suddenly stops feeding, stands upright and weaves the upper part of the body in a kind of hula-like motion. Then after a few times resumes feeding."

Comparison with other herons:

	Cattle	American	Snowy	Little Blue
Size	20-27 in.	37-40 in.	20-27 in.	20-25 Immature
Bill	Short, stout, stubby, yellow	Yellow, slender	Narrow, dark	Narrow, dark, bicolor
Legs	Yellow, immature dark	Blackish	Dark	Dark, greenish
Feet	Yellow, immature dark	Dark	Yellow	Dark, greenish
Habitat	Near cattle	Marshes, ponds, lakes	Marshes, ponds, fields, meadows	Marshes, ponds, meadows
Food	Insects, ticks	Aquatic fish, frogs, snakes, lily seed	Aquatic fish, tadpoles, snails, crayfish	Crayfish, frogs, grasshoppers, lizards
Color	White, brushed buff on head, neck and back	White	White	White

All the herons in flight have their necks drawn in, while the cranes fly with their necks extended straight out.

1228 South 29th Street
Birmingham, Alabama
Received April 15, 1957

BARN OWL FOOD HABITS

By JULIAN L. DUSI

A pair of Barn Owls, *Tyto alba pratincola*, have roosted in the tower of Samford Hall, on the Alabama Polytechnic Institute campus at Auburn, for a number of years. This has made easy the study of their food habits by the collecting of the pellets of hair and bones which they regurgitate at the roost.

Pellets were collected from this roost over a period of a year. The pellets were stored in a can in a dark place so that clothes moths could eat the hair. This left an accumulation of bones. The bones were carefully sorted and the skulls and lower jaws removed. These were then identified.

A total of 190 skulls were recovered. Of these, 136 (71.5 per cent) were cotton rats, *Sigmodon hispidus*; 28 (14.7 per cent) were least shrews, *Cryptotis parva*; 8 (4.4 per cent) were house mice, *Mus musculus*; 5 (2.6 per cent) were short-tailed shrews, *Blarina brevicauda*; 4 (2.1 per cent) were old field mice; *Peromyscus polionotus*; 3 (1.5 per cent) were pine mice; *Pitymys pinetorium*; 1 (0.5 per cent) cotton mouse, *Peromyscus gossypinus*, was present; 1 (0.5 per cent) southeastern shrew, *Sorex longirostris*, was present; and 1 (0.5 per cent) Starling, *Sturnus vulgaris*, was present.

Cotton rats were by far the most important food item. They were the largest of the mammals and were most frequently eaten. The next highest percentage eaten was least shrews. These were next to the smallest in size and it is surprising that they were caught so frequently. Of the other mammals eaten, it seems odd that more house mice, old field mice, and cotton mice were not taken since they are usually quite plentiful. These, however, were just a small part of the food eaten. Moles were an unusual item since they spend little time above ground. They are a large animal for Barn Owls to eat, so they made a good addition to the diet of the owls on the nights that no moles were caught. The one Starling eaten must have been roosting on the building near the entrance to the tower. It must have been easily available because Barn Owls seldom feed on birds.

The one southeastern shrew eaten is an interesting addition because it is a rather rare mammal in Alabama. The first record of this shrew was recovered from a Barred Owl stomach by Howell. Several ad-