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OBSERVATIONS ON THE CATTLE EGRET IN COLOMBIA
(OBSERVATIONS ON BUBULCUS IBIS IBIS IN COLOMBIA)

(Contributions to the Study of the Fauna of Colombia XIII)

By

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In a recent publication (1957) I mentioned the fact that the african cattle egret seemed to be established in the plateau of the Cauca Valley Department in Colombia, since I had observed it here for some time ~~during~~ the year around, and in numbers and ~~behaviour~~ that indicated that they were permanently ~~established~~ residents rather than migrant visitors. Nevertheless I also mentioned that in spite of their abundance and permanence it had not been possible for me ^{by} ~~to~~ that date to find any nests,

Shortly afterwards, in the month of april of this year, (1958), I was informed by a friend Mr. F. Restrepo-White, that some egrets were nesting in large numbers near the town of Tuluá 80 miles north of Cali. I ^{went} ~~set~~ immediately ^{to} the place, ^{where} I had seen from some distance ^(a) the month before, what ~~then~~ I took for a heron roosting place, ^{It was thought to be a roost} since ~~it was~~ at dusk that I observed a tree covered with ^{specks} white ~~figures~~. ^{What I found was} to find there a beautiful colony of Bubulcus ibis ibis (~~Ardeola i. ibis ?~~), built on a very large and tall Samán tree (Samanea), not ~~too~~ far to the south east of the town. The colony consisted of some 300 to 350 nests in different stage of development. Some were being built at the time, and the birds were very active carrying building material that ^{consisted of} ~~was formed by~~ sticks, twigs, and even large branches and small bushes, ^{Some of these were} too bulky and heavy for their carriers, ^{and} that had to be dropped from the air when the birds' could not ^{reach} ~~climb~~ and reach the nesting place or ~~circling around~~ to gain altitude to reach it, with their load. There was a feverish activity, and the noise and cackling of the birds almost deafening. Many nests contained eggs, (to judge from the birds' antics), some of which were being tossed out by the pugnacious ^{egrets} ~~birds~~ that kept chasing each other ^{from} ~~out~~ of the nests. ~~Many~~ Many more nests were occupied by young birds, from recently hatched ones, to birds developping feathers and even many almost ready to leave the nest.

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There were
and also some young ones ~~were~~ following their parents in short flights.

The ground under the tree was literally covered with egg shells, twigs that were being reused by birds that came down for them, dropped food, young ~~alive~~ and dead nestlings too young to survive the fall, *there were* and of course droppings and regurgitated pellets.

The owner of the farm in which this colony was established, informed me ~~that~~ that the birds had started their colony there sometime in January or early February, (fairly dry season here), *of* this year for the first time. This visit ~~gave~~ me an opportunity to take some pictures of the colony and some of the life that was going on in it, a few of which illustrate this paper. Besides the black and white pictures I got excellent color ~~slides and~~ transparencies too.

One month later, I had the privilege to be accompanied by Dr. Alden H. Miller, Director of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, of the University of California, now carrying on special observations and work on birds in western Colombia, to visit another colony of Bubulcus ibis near Guacarí, about 50 mi. *or* north of Cali, and 30 mi. *or* south of the other colony visited earlier. Perhaps it is worth mentioning here, that both these colonies, are near the base of the Central Andes ~~on~~ *are* their western side, where they get all the afternoon sun, and also both *are* located not more than 100 yards from ~~the~~ farm houses where there is continuous activity of all sorts, even *including that of* with heavy ~~machinery~~ agricultural machinery, *The birds* and seem not to be much disturbed by the presence of people *around*. Of course when one *they* approaches the place, some of the birds take to the air, but ~~to~~ *they* return shortly afterwards to their respective places.

This second colony is located for the most part on two low, but large catclaw trees, and also on a tall dead (killed by the birds) Gualanday tree (Jacaranda), and a young Samán, not as big as the one on which the first colony is established, but larger than the other three trees. This second colony was in about the same *slight* activity as the first one. Dr. Miller and I estimate this colony to contain about 500 nests. The lower location of some of the nests here permitted *+* better observation and allowed some pictures of the young in the nests. In both colonies the larger young

birds found on the ground looked strong and healthy, they probably were feeding upon food dropped from above, or else were being fed by their parents, while the younger ones were starving and some were found dead. Others managed to climb back along low branches and eventually reached their nests, this in the second colony.

We were told by Messrs. Jaramillo, the ranch owners, that this colony had been established there two years ago, and ^{showed} us two big dead Ceibas ~~(Ceiba pentandra)~~ ^{were} that were occupied by the birds in the beginning, and died because of the bird invasion. Also they mentioned the fact that the birds had been nesting there continually for two years. This seemed quite unusual to us, so I decided to pay a later visit to the place and find out for myself what ^{thru there was} ~~could be~~ in this statement. ^{According to} ~~So last Sunday~~ (Dec. 7) I drove to the site to find ~~out~~ that the birds were still abundant there, early in the afternoon; ^{possibly} ~~may be~~ over one hundred birds ^{were} seen, but I found that only very few old nests remained, four or five of which had been recently abandoned, and only one contained a full grown ~~and~~ nestling, well feathered, that followed the parents along the branches begging for food, to return immediately to the nest and go out again ~~and~~ calling continually. Most of the birds now were young ~~birds~~ ^{there} with black bills, and fewer adults with yellow bills.

At about five o'clock in the afternoon started the parade of flocks of birds coming to roost at the place. These flocks consisted of from 5 or 6 to 25 or 30 birds each, and what at the beginning was a small flock every three to five minutes, developed into an almost continuous stream of white birds, the flocks being larger and spaced a few hundred yards, sometimes less than fifty yards apart. Most of the birds came from one direction only, ^{north-northwest} ~~n.w.~~ in this instance. The new comers settled on the same trees that were already occupied by the ^{remaining} ~~staying~~ birds.

So as far as my observation gives proof, it seems that the cattle egrets have here a period of rest during which they do not carry on ~~the~~ breeding. No activity was observed in the whole afternoon that would indicate any new building of nests or any breeding behaviour.

What probably happens is that the birds do not abandon completely their nesting site during the year, using it as roosting place while not breeding, and untrained observers ~~little-observing people~~ do not seem to realize that the birds are not actually breeding, in spite of the difference in noise and performances of the birds.

Another perhaps interesting observation worth ^{citing} quoting here is that a pair of snowy egrets (Leucophoyx thula), were among the cattle egrets during the peak of the nesting period in the very middle of the more densely populated trees and they seemed not to bother or be bored by the other genus. ^{egrets felt} ~~while this pair~~ Notwithstanding that this pair exhibited their full nuptial dress, I could not detect any breeding behaviour in them, except for ^{then} ~~being~~ perching quite close together ^{and displaying their plumes among the activity} amidst the rally going on around them.

It was impossible to see the nest contents of the first colony on account of the height of the tree. In the second colony ^{it} was easier; some nests ^{had} from one to three chicks, mostly two; in many instances the young were quite different in age indicating some delay in the laying of the eggs, ~~or perhaps, later replacement of eggs~~ ~~trown off the nest during the fights.~~

7 In my second visit to the Guacari colony I observed that one of the Ceiba trees originally used by the birds as ^a nesting site had been cut down as dead some time earlier, but the other Ceiba, to my surprise is coming back to life and shows many new leaves on its western side, ~~now~~ that is seldom used by the ~~birds~~ egrets, and then only as resting place.

➤ In contrast to what has been ^{recorded} ~~observed~~ recently (Haverschmidt 1957) on the roosting habits of these egrets in Surinam, Messrs. Jaramillo and family inform me that at about 7 to 7.30 p.m. [stops completely] all activity in the colony and no more noise or cackling is heard during ^{three hours} the night, and no evidence of it is noticed ~~until dawn next morning~~ day. Haverschmidt ^(see it) ~~l. c.~~ mentions the possibility that

these egrets nest in Surinam in the vast marshes on both sides of the Nannicreek. It may be so there, but probably will be interesting to ^{note} inform here that in Colombia in general, as far as my personal observations show, these birds prefer to ~~frequent~~ ^{recently planted} dry country and occasionally rice paddies, to marshy areas. The two colonies of breeding birds are found ~~xxx~~ on solid ground with no marshes for several miles around, but, probably one interesting ^{detail} key is that both colonies are located above small artificial water supply channels.

In the breeding places they stay all day long with short wanderings for ~~in~~ food, but I have seen (Jan. 5. 1955) at El Guabito Ranch, near La paila, Valle, a flock of 60 birds come as early as 6 a.m. to land on a pasture and start feeding.

During a study and collecting trip to the Llanos (plains) of eastern Colombia in February and March ^{of} this year, I observed many times ~~individually~~ ^{groups of} cattle egrets there, not in great numbers, but usually in small flocks of from 5 to 20 at the most. ^I Collected a couple for the record.

In a recent ^{collecting} ~~trip~~ ^(November) to the upper Putumayo area ⁱⁿ on the Amazon basin and about 30 miles east of the base of the Andes in the low flat country covered with the amazonian jungle, and in cattle-grazing fields recently opened up there, I was surprised to see some cattle egrets. First time ^{The} I saw ~~xxx~~ ^{Nov. 5. 58} a solitary bird, later, ^{Nov. 6.} I located a small flock of about 30, which show how the invasion of this continent is being carried out by the new comers ⁵. These have probably reached that corner of the Amazon by following the large rivers to the west. ^{This flock was seen several times later.}

^{The Cattle Egret} It still remains to be found on the Pacific Coast of Colombia and on the ^{occurrence} Patia Valley, which I would not be surprised to see soon through the upper plateau of Popayan, which gives the ideal means of reaching the Patia Valley for birds migrating south ^{from} of the Cauca Valley, whence they can follow the Patia to the Pacific. ^{see p. 2 manuscript.}

Two captive birds are kept at a school of the Mary's Brothers in Pasto. These were taken near Palmira in Valle according to the information given by the

Brother in ~~charge~~, not collected in Narino Department.

As far as my knowledge goes on these egrets and their activities in South America, Colombia is the third country and the Cauca Valley the westernmost place where the cattle egret has been found breeding. The other two records ^{are} being for British Guiana and Surinam (Haverschmidt, 1957). I don't know of any other report of the cattle egrets breeding in South America.

I am deeply indebted to Dr. Alden H. Miller for inviting this contribution for "The Condor" and for his ^{expert} advise and help, ^{in many ways} and for the reading of the manuscript and the proofs.

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