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OBSERVATIONS ON THE CATTLE EGRET IN COLOMBIA

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 the year around, and in numbers and behavior that indicated that they were permanent 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 that date to find any nests.

Shortly afterwards, in the month of April of this year, 1958, I was informed by my 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 immediately to the place, where a month earlier I had seen from some distance what I took for a heron roosting place since at dusk I observed a tree covered with specks. What I found there was a beautiful colony of Bubulcus ibis ibis, built on a very large and tall Samán tree (Samanea saman), not far to the southeast 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 sticks, twigs, and even large branches and small bushes, some of these were too bulky and heavy for their carriers and had to be dropped from the air when the birds could not reach the height of the nesting place or circle to gain altitude to reach it with their load. There was feverish activity, and the noise and cackling of the birds was almost deafening. To judge from the birds antics, many nests contained eggs, some of which were being tossed out by the pugnacious egrets that kept chasing each other from the nests. Many more nests were occupied by young birds, from recently hatched ones, to birds developing feathers and even many almost ready to leave the nest. There were also some young ones 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, live young, and dead nestlings too young to survive the fall. And there were of course droppings and regurgitated pellets.

The owner of the farm in which this colony was established informed me 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 of 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 transparencies too.

One month later, I had the privilege to be accompanied by Dr. Alden H. Miller, to visit another colony of Bubulcus ibis near Guacarí, about 50 miles north of Cali, and 30 miles 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 their western side, where they get all the afternoon sun, and also both are located not more than 100 yards from farm houses where there is constant activity of all sorts, even including that of heavy agricultural machinery. The birds seem not to be much disturbed by the presence of people around. Of course when one approaches the place, some of the birds take to the air, but they return shortly afterward to their respective places.

This second colony is located for the most part on two low, but large Chimango trees, (*Pithecellobium dulce*), 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 new colony was in about the same stage of 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 younger ones were starving and some were found dead. Others managed to climb back along low branches and eventually reached their nests in this second colony.

We were told by Messrs. Jaramillo, the ranch owners, that this colony had been established there two years ago, and they showed us two big dead Ceibas (Ceiba pentandra) that were occupied by the birds in the beginning and which 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 truth there was in this statement. According on December 7 I drove to the site to find that the birds were still abundant there, early in the afternoon; possibly over one hundred birds were seen, but I found that only very few old nests remained, four or five of which had apparently been recently abandoned, and only one contained a full grown nestling, well feathered, that followed the parents along the branches begging for food, to return immediately to the nest and go out again, calling continually. Most of the birds now were young with black bill; there were 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 egrets each, and what at the beginning was a small flock every three to five minutes developed into an almost continuous stream of white forms, 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 in this instance. The new comers settled on the same trees that were already occupied by the remaining birds.

So 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 breeding. No activity was observed in the whole afternoon that would indicate any new building of nests or any breeding behavior.

What probably happens is that the birds do not abandon completely their nesting site during the year, using it as a roosting place while not breeding, and untrained observers 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 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 tree. They seemed not to bother or be bored by the egrets of the other genus. Notwithstanding that this pair exhibited their full nuptial dress, ~~which is not the case with the cattle egrets~~, I could not detect any other breeding behavior in them, except for them perching quite close together and displaying their plumes among the activity 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 perhaps some delay in the laying of the eggs. The nests are relatively small and when the young attain some development there is scarcely room for them, the parents then stand guard from a nearby branch. When the young reach a larger size, they desert the nest and perch on the adjacent branches where they are fed by the parents and run along the branches to meet them more quickly and receive food.

Feeding of the young seems to be carried on all day long in the colony without noticeable difference in activity at different hours of the day. Of course the parents perch and rest at times for long periods near their offspring. The chicks show an insatiable hunger and seem to be desperate to be fed. Frequently two young beg to be fed at the same time, practically attacking the feeder.

On the trees that have lost their leaves because of having been used for long time as nesting sites, the nests stand completely unprotected from rain or from the intense tropical sun. In some instances the young can be seen trying to protect

is being carried out by the new comers. These have probably reached that corner of the Amazon forest by following the large rivers to the west. This flock was seen several times later.

The Cattle Egret still remains to be found in the Department of Nariño and on the Patía Valley, which occurrence I would not be surprised to see soon by invasion through the upper plateau of Popayán, which gives the ideal means of reaching the Patía Valley for birds migrating south from the Cauca Valley, whence they can follow the Patía River to Nariño and the Pacific.

The Cattle Egret has been reported on the Atlantic coast, the Magdalena Valley, the Llanos, the Cauca Valley, the northern part of Cauca Department, also has been reported by Dugand (1954) in Santander and the Sabana de Bogotá. Now with the present report for the Putumayo in southern Colombia, it can be said that with exception of Nariño its range covers almost all the country.

Two Captive birds I observed at a school of the Mary's Brothers in Pasto were taken near Palmira, Valle, according to the information given by the Brother in charge and were not collected in Nariño Department.

As far as my present knowledge goes of 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 for British Guiana and Surinam (Haverschmidt, 1957) both in the northeastern part of South America.

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