

SHORT NOTE

First record of white phase Reef Heron (*Egretta sacra*) in New Zealand

On 7 June 1987, while counting birds along the eastern shore of the Avon-Heathcote Estuary, Christchurch, I came across an unusual white egret feeding near roosting waders and gulls at the tip of the New Brighton spit. Two White Herons (*Egretta alba*), one Little Egret (*E. garzetta*), one Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) and 30 Royal Spoonbills (*Platalea regia*) were present on the estuary at this time and I initially assumed that this bird was one or another of these. However, it is very unusual for egrets to feed in that part of the estuary, and as I moved closer, it quickly became apparent that this bird was something odd, unlike any heron or egret I had seen before.

First impressions were of an all-white egret with a bicoloured bill and green legs; smaller than a White Heron, stockier and more heavily built than a Little Egret, and larger and with a longer bill than a Cattle Egret. I was able to approach to within 10-15 metres of the bird without causing alarm. Observations were made through 8x30 binoculars and a 17x60 telescope for two hours on 7 June and for 50 minutes on 8 June. Good views of the bird feeding and at rest were obtained and lengthy field notes made. A condensed description follows.

Plumage and appearance

Completely white head and body. White chin feathers extending along base of bill, giving bill a very thick profile. Compared with Little Egret, the neck was much thicker, the bill much heavier and the tail appeared proportionately shorter. Plumes on back and lower breast, obvious only when ruffled by wind or by the bird while preening; no plumes on nape.

Soft parts

Eyes: Iris yellow, pupil black.

Bill: Heavy and about one and a half times the length of the head. Base of bill yellow, upper mandible dark grey-brown, lower mandible green-yellow, giving the bill a bicoloured appearance.

Legs & feet: Yellowish green, legs short.

Behaviour

The bird spent much of the time feeding in shallow water on the rising tide. The main feeding method was to walk up and down a 30 metre stretch of the tidal channel in belly-deep water 1-2 metres out from the bank. It took prey by stalking and stabbing, holding its head in a position more vertical than is typical for White Heron and White-faced Heron (*Ardea novaehollandiae*). The capture rate was very low, prey being taken on average only about four times in every period of 10 minutes watched. Occasionally the bird would run after escaping prey, often using its wings to increase speed and sometimes 'leap-frogging' several metres forward in a manner described in Hancock & Kushlan (1984).

The bird was observed feeding near the mouth of the estuary, on an area of sandy substrates similar to the habitat of "Blue" Reef Herons in Golden Bay, Nelson (pers. obs.) but contrasting with the muddier western and southern sides of the estuary, where herons, egrets and spoonbills are usually found. When not feeding, the bird roosted alone on a sandbank,

assuming the hunched-up position typical of "Blue" Reef Herons. While roosting, the bird was often mobbed by Red-billed Gulls (*Larus novaehollandiae*), but it fed undisturbed alongside South Island Pied Oystercatchers (*Haematopus ostralegus finschi*) and Bar-tailed Godwits (*Limosa lapponica*).

After the first sighting, a study of a number of Australian and New Zealand field guides quickly discounted White Heron, Little Egret and Cattle Egret. Intermediate Egret (*Egretta intermedia*) was a possibility, particularly as one had been present on the Avon-Heathcote almost exactly a year earlier. However, structure and bare part coloration were not consistent with that species but did match closely the descriptions for the white phase of the Reef Heron as it is found outside New Zealand. The main diagnostic features are stocky appearance, uniform white plumage, yellow bill, sometimes with upper mandible slate grey, and short yellow-green or grey legs (Williams 1985).

With this provisional identification in mind I informed other Christchurch birdwatchers and on relocating the bird the next day carefully rechecked the important features. Later the same day Kathleen Harrison also found the bird and confirmed the identification of white phase Reef Heron. The bird was last seen at the estuary on 9 June and according to the locals had been present since about the 4th.

The identification of white phase Reef Heron has been accepted by the Rare Birds Committee and in the light of a re-evaluation of a 1944-5 record from Wairau Bar near Blenheim (Wodzicki & Eyles 1945; Brian D. Bell, pers.comm.) it is now assumed to be the first sighting of this colour form in New Zealand. White Reef Herons are common on many tropical Pacific Islands as well as the northern coastline of Australia and throughout South-east Asia (Turbott *et al.* 1980, Hancock & Kushlan 1984). New Zealand is well south of their usual range (Falla *et al.* 1978).

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