

OBSERVATIONS ON THE CATTLE EGRET IN COLOMBIA

By F. C. LEHMANN V.

In a recent publication (Lehmann, Nov. Colombianas, no. 3, 1957:107) I mentioned that African Cattle Egrets (*Bulbulcus ibis ibis*) seemed to be established in the plateau of the Department of Cauca Valley in Colombia, since I had observed them in numbers there for some time, the year around, and under circumstances that indicated that the birds were permanent residents rather than migrant visitors. But I also pointed out that in spite of their abundance and permanence it had not been possible for me to find any nests.

Shortly afterward, in April of 1958, I was informed by Mr. F. Restrepo-White that 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 to be a heron roosting place. On this last occasion I found a beautiful nesting colony of Cattle Egrets established in 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 stages 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. Certain of these objects 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. At other times the birds had to circle to gain altitude to reach the nests 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, which ranged from recently hatched juveniles to those that were 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 re-used 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 on which this colony was established informed me that the birds had started their colony there sometime in January or early February (the moderately 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 it in.

On April 24, I had the privilege of the company of Alden H. Miller on a visit to another colony of Cattle Egrets 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. Both also 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. Of course when one approaches the colony, some of the birds take to the air, but they return shortly afterward to their respective places.

This second colony was located for the most part on two low, but large chiminango trees (*Pithecellobium dulce*); but it extended also to a tall, dead gualanday tree (*Jacaranda*), that had been killed by the birds and to a young samán, not as large as the one on which the first colony was 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



Fig 1. Nesting colony of Cattle Egrets about 50 miles north of Cali, Colombia, April, 1958. Upper: leafless tree showing how some nests in the colony are unprotected from rain or sun. Lower: close-up view of nests and adults in another tree.

estimated that it contained about 500 nests. The lower location of some of the nests here permitted better observation. 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. Smaller young 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 stated that the birds had been nesting there continually since the beginning. This constant breeding seemed quite unusual to us, so I decided to pay a later visit to the place and verify this matter. Accordingly 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; 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 present now were young, with black bills; there were fewer yellow-billed adults.

At about five o'clock in the afternoon started the parade of flocks of birds coming to roost at this 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 earlier arrivals.

My limited observations suggest that the Cattle Egrets here have a period of rest during which they do not carry on breeding. No activity was observed in the course of 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 in the course of the year but use it as a roosting place while not breeding. An untrained observer would not realize that the birds are not actually breeding, in spite of the differences in noise and performances of them.

Another observation worth reporting here is that a pair of Snowy Egrets (*Leucophoyx thula*) was established among the Cattle Egrets during the peak of the nesting period. The Snowy Egrets were in the very middle of the most densely populated tree. This single pair seemed not to bother or be disturbed by the Cattle Egrets. Members of this pair were in full nuptial dress, but I could not detect any breeding behavior in them, except that they were perched quite close together and displayed their plumes.

In the second Cattle Egret colony some nests had from one to three chicks, but mostly two; in many instances the young were quite different in age, indicating perhaps some delay in the laying of the second 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 along which they run to meet their parents quickly and receive food from them.

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 at times the parents perch and rest 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 long been used for 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 themselves by approaching a branch that casts some shadow (fig. 1).

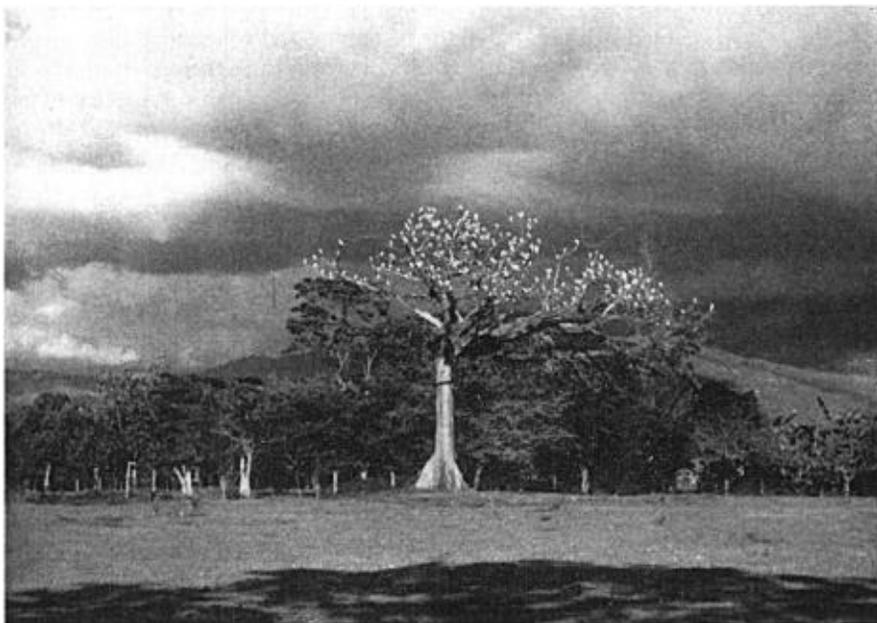


Fig. 2. African Cattle Egrets (*Bulbulcus ibis ibis*) roosting in a ceiba tree about 50 miles north of Cali, Colombia.

In my second visit to the Guacarí colony I observed that one of the ceiba trees originally used by the egrets as a nesting site had been cut down as dead some time earlier, but the other ceiba, to my surprise was coming back to life and showed many new leaves on its eastern side. It was at that time seldom used by the egrets, and then only as a resting place (fig. 2).

In contrast to what has been recorded recently (Haverschmidt, *Ardea*, 45, 1957: 168-176) on the roosting habits of Cattle Egrets in Surinam, Messrs. Jaramillo and family inform me that at about 7 p.m. all activity stops completely in the colony and no more noise or cackling is heard during the night-time hours. Haverschmidt also suggests the possibility that these egrets nest in Surinam in the vast marshes on both sides of the Nannicreek. Such use of marshes may occur there, but it is interesting to note that in Colombia in general, as far as my personal observations show, these birds prefer dry country and recently planted rice paddies to marshy areas. The two colonies of breeding birds are found on solid ground with no marshes for several miles around, but both colonies are located above small artificial water supply channels.

The distribution and spread of the Cattle Egret in Colombia is reflected by several recent observations. During a study and collecting trip to the Llanos (plains) of eastern Colombia in February and March of 1958, I many times observed Cattle Egrets, not in

great numbers, but usually in small flocks of from 5 to 20 at the most. I collected two for the record.

More recently in the upper Putumayo area in the Amazon basin, about 50 miles east of the base of the Andes in the low flat country covered with Amazonian jungle, and in grazing land recently opened up there, I was surprised to see Cattle Egrets. The first time I saw a solitary bird; later on I located a small flock of about 30. This shows how the invasion of this continent is being carried out by the newcomers. These birds in the Putumayo area have probably reached this corner of the Amazon forest by following the large rivers to the west. Mr. M. A. Carriker, Jr., who collected the first known specimen of the Cattle Egret for Colombia, reports that in December, 1958, in the Caquetá region southeast of Florencia, he several times observed a flock of Cattle Egrets of more than two hundred individuals across the river from Venecia on the way to Montañita. Here he observed them going along with the cattle and in pastures that were dry.

In Popayán a flock of about 60 has been observed in November and December of 1958. This group comes every night to roost in the tallest trees of the main plaza.

The Cattle Egret still remains to be found in the Department of Nariño and in the Patía Valley in Colombia. I would not be surprised to see it in that area soon by invasion through the upper plateau of Popayán; by this route they could follow the Patía River to Nariño and the Pacific. Two captive birds which I observed at a school of the Mary's Brothers in Pasto, Nariño, were taken near Palmira, Valle, according to the information given by the Brother in charge.

To summarize, the Cattle Egret has been observed in Colombia on the Atlantic coast, in the Magdalena Valley, on the Llanos, in the Cauca Valley, and in the northern part of Cauca Department; also it has been reported by Dugand (Lozania, no. 8, 1954:1-7) in Santander and on the Savana de Bogotá. Now with the present reports for the Caquetá and Putumayo areas in southern Colombia, it can be said that with exception of Nariño its range covers almost all the country.

In so far as I know, Colombia is the third country in South America where the Cattle Egret has been found breeding. The other two countries are British Guiana and Surinam (Haverschmidt, *loc. cit.*), both in the northeastern part of the continent. The Cauca Valley in Colombia is the westernmost point of occurrence.

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