

A colour-banded Great Egret from Ontario sighted in the Azores Islands

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Figure 1. This map shows the Nottawasaga Island banding location (star) of a Great Egret and the Azores Islands where the bird was resighting during December 2005 - January 2006. *Map courtesy of Andrew Jano.*

Since 2001, the Canadian Wildlife Service has colour-banded over 850 young flightless Great Egrets (*Ardea alba*, henceforth GREGs) at three sites in Lake Huron and the Niagara River; 95% of those birds were banded at Nottawasaga Island in southern Georgian Bay, near Collingwood, Ontario (Figure 1). The colour bands were red with large visible white numbers and letters (Figure 2). Each autumn several reports of colour-banded birds have been received from southern Ontario and western New

York). Less frequently, and later in the year, reports of these colour-banded egrets have been received from the southern U.S. and the Caribbean, e.g. North Carolina, Florida and Cuba. Recently, a report of one of these colour-banded birds was received from the Azores Islands, a group of 9 islands located approximately 1500 km SW of Lisbon, Portugal, and 3900 km from the east coast of North America (Figure 1). The details of that sighting are the subject of this short note.



Figure 2. An Ontario-banded Great Egret, similar to this one, was observed in the Azores Islands from November 2005 –January 2006.

Photo courtesy of Mike Veltri.



Figure 3. A Great Egret showing its aluminum band. *Photo courtesy of Sandra Hawkins.*

On 5 November 2005, a Great Egret, attributed to the North American subspecies (*A. a. egretta*), was observed by Ricardo Guerreiro at Mosterios on the western end of São Miguel Island in the central Azores Islands (See large scale map of this island and the below-listed locations at <http://azores.seawatching.net>). The North American subspecies is identifiable from the European subspecies (*A. a. alba*) by leg colouration. The legs of the North American subspecies are entirely jet black while those of the European subspecies are mottled dark, with the tibia suffused with a pink to reddish tinge (Hancock and Kushlan 1978). There is also an African subspecies, *A. a. melanorhynchos*, which does not migrate. The observed bird carried a red plastic band on its left leg, enumerated 27F, and an aluminium band on its right leg, # 1717-33033, both of which were read from afar by birders with telescopes.

The colour-banded egret was next observed on 13 November, 8 days later, at Vila Franca do Campo on the south coast of São Miguel Island, approximately 40 km SE of Mosterios. The band characteristics were read by several different observers: Rami Lindroos, Keijo Wahlroos, Ingvar Torsson, Svante Åberg, and Bosse Carlsson. The bird was then next observed inland, 12 km NNE, at Lagoa das Furnas, where it was regularly seen until 14 January 2006, by Staffan Rodebrand. Thus, this bird was probably resident on São Miguel Island for a period of not less than 70 days. Little information is available on the habits or behaviour of the bird while it was present on the Azores. It was the only Great Egret present at the first two locations but was one of 2-3 feeding at the Lagoa. Of the bird's appearance in the Azores, Mssr Rodebrand relates (in litt.): "The situation in autumn in 2005 was that there were a lot of Nearctic

species around due to a high number of depressions moving eastward off the Atlantic this year (see link to Hurricane weather on Birding Azores page General information). Late autumn this year hosted also a rather good number of North European birdwatchers (Portuguese birdwatchers are still very few, even if this bird first was spotted by a Portuguese), all keen birdwatchers with good bird knowledge and very active in searching for birds in suitable habitats. But all these moving around and rarely staying any longer in one place (like for watching the behaviour of a Great White Egret).”

This record, of an Ontario-banded GREG in the Azores, provides conclusive proof that the North American subspecies does occasionally find its way to the Azores. It adds credence to the visual observations of 18 other black-legged GREs, thought to be the North American subspecies.

Obviously, the Azores Islands are not on the Great Egret’s normal migration route. This bird was, assuredly, a vagrant, albeit perhaps a regular one, to the Azores. With this record, Great Egrets had been recorded on 19 occasions on the Azores since 2001. For comparison, the American Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) also occurs in the Azores — 23 birds so far known. For more information, see: Birding Azores at <http://azores.seawatching.net> and go to the database, <http://azores.seawatching.net/index.php?page=rarebirdref&id=1999>.

The observed egret was banded on 27 June 2005 at Nottawasaga Island, Collingwood, Ontario, as a flightless young; it was one of 143 banded there in 2005. The three records from the Azores are the only reported sightings of this individual.

Acknowledgements

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Literature Cited

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