

THE IPSWICH CATTLE EGRETS

by Jim Berry, Ipswich

As abundant as Cattle Egrets have become in the southeastern United States, they have not been expanding to any significant degree in Massachusetts. Here they are still a local species and not always easy to find.

One of the best places in the state to see Cattle Egrets is Ipswich and neighboring Essex. Here, they come daily from May till early October to feed in the pastures of the local cattle farms, following the cows and gobbling whatever creatures are kicked up or occasionally following a plowing tractor for the same reason, as they do down south. Although they have been seen on several Ipswich farms, such as the large one along Route 133 known as "Maplecroft," the best place to see them is the Appleton Farm, which lies on the west side of Route 1A, immediately north of the Hamilton-Ipswich town line.

Appleton Farm (officially, "Farms") is almost as old as Ipswich. The town was established in 1634, and the Appletons started their farm four years later. It has been a working cattle farm ever since and is believed to be the oldest farm in continuous operation in the United States. The current herd, which consists of Holsteins and Jerseys, was organized in 1969 when the current manager took over the operation of the farm and turned it into one of the best dairy operations in New England.

There are several pastures in this five-hundred-acre farm, which is also a wildlife preserve. (An additional 164 acres of the Appleton property, along Cutler Road in Hamilton, were donated in 1970 to the Trustees of Reservations and now constitute the "Appleton Farms Grass Rides," where many *Bird Observer* readers have seen Barred Owls, Pileated Woodpeckers, and other wooded-swamp species.) The most important of these is what I call the front pasture - the scenic fifty-acre field that is easily observable from Route 1A. It is the most important to birdwatchers, because it is the only one you can see. Like most working farms this one is not open to visitors, and under no circumstances should you attempt to view the pasture from anywhere but the main highway. Fortunately, that is easy to do because the road is wide enough to permit temporary "live" parking without danger. Observers should be careful to pull all the way over to the edge, as at any stop.

As you may have learned if you have birded Ipswich, the egrets are not always to be seen in the front pasture. That is because the cows are not always in the front pasture. So your first objective is to arrive when they are. In the summer of 1985, this was in late afternoon, after five o'clock. Before that time, the egrets were either in other parts of the farm or on other farms. But at 5:00 P.M. the herd was let into the front pasture, and the pattern will presumably not change in 1986. Thus the return trip from Newburyport to points south after an all-day Plum Island feast provides a perfect opportunity to stop off in Ipswich for dessert.

The richness of your dessert will depend on what time of year it is. Numbers of Cattle Egrets are usually sparse in May and June, begin to build up through July, then hit their peak in August when the adults are joined by more and more of their offspring and perhaps by some post-breeding wanderers dispersing from elsewhere, as herons are prone to do. The most I have seen there was a total of 61 on August 28, 1983; twice during August 1985 I counted 49 and 50. Some of them leave in September, but many stay well into the month, and a few can usually be seen into early October. My latest record was of nine along Route 133 in Ipswich on November 6, 1982, after a solid week of warm, southerly winds; two of these stayed until at least November 14.

JIM BERRY has been counting Cattle Egrets in Ipswich since 1972 when he moved north from the District of Columbia to escape the oppressive heat and humidity of that area. He runs a federal personnel training curriculum in the U.S. Office of Personnel Management in Boston, and many of his *Bird Observer* sightings are of birds seen from the train on his daily commute to and from work (see *BOEM* 4:1, January-February 1976). For five years Jim wrote a wildlife column in the weekly *Ipswich Today* until the paper folded in 1983. (He assures us that his column and the paper's demise were unrelated.) For a more complete article on Ipswich birds, see Jim's "Finding Birds in Ipswich" (*BOEM* 7:6, December 1979).



Cattle Egret
Wayland, MA
May 10, 1985
Photo by R. K. Walton

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