

AMERICAN CROWS ATTACK CATTLE EGRET

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Crows have been documented mobbing (Bent 1946, Robinette and Crockett 1999) and even killing (Long 1990) raptors, and killing nestling wading birds (Bancroft et al. 1990), free-flying Japanese Quail (*Coturnix c. japonica*) (Labisky 1961) and free-flying songbirds (Cuccia 1984, Putnam 1992). Bent (1946) provided an account of a Fish Crow (*Corvus ossifragus*) repeatedly chasing and attacking a Ward's Heron (*Ardea herodias wardi*), and Walters (1983) documented the death of a Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) caused by a pair of Carrion Crows (*Corvus corone*). However, we found no published reports of American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) mobbing or attacking free-flying wading birds. Here we describe the repeated attack on a Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) by a pair of American Crows.

On 24 December 2002, RFL, while watching a Crested Caracara (*Polyborus plancus*) foraging in a pasture that contained cattle and attendant Cattle Egrets, observed a pair of American Crows (identified by vocalization) repeatedly attack a single Cattle Egret. The pasture was located adjacent to a large palm nursery in Okeechobee County, Florida (N 25°45.678', W 80°14.566'). Weather was characterized by a clear sky, a temperature of 17 C, and a gusty northwest wind of 30 km/h. At 1053, a pair of American Crows dove on a Cattle Egret flying westerly at a height of 3 m; one of the pair pecked the egret on the back of the head, knocking the egret to the ground. The egret immediately took flight in an easterly direction. By 1056, over a travel course of 180 m, the crows knocked the egret to ground three additional times. After the fourth attack, the egret took refuge in a dense Washingtonian palm (*Washingtonia* sp.), approximately 6 m in height. The pursuing pair of crows then hovered above and around the palm and dove repeatedly at the egret, but was prevented from further contact with the egret because of obstructing fronds. The crows departed in a northerly flight at 1100. The Cattle Egret left the safety of the palm at 1105, at which time it flew easterly in an apparently normal flight.

Unlike raptors, Cattle Egrets pose no known threats to crows; thus, anti-predator mobbing would not explain the attacks on the egret. Although distinguishing predators from prey can be problematic for young corvids, Heinrich et al. (1995) found that young corvids hesitated to approach large objects, which suggests that these were not young crows. Corvids also employ a variety of scrounging tactics (Bugnyar and Kotrschal 2002); however, there was no indication that the crows were attempting to steal regurgitated food from the egret. Even though the American Crow and Cattle Egret are similar in mass, about 520 g and 340 g, respectively, the most plausible explanation for the aggressive and persistent attacks is that the crows were attempting to prey on the egret.

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