

# First confirmed record of Western Reef-Heron (*Egretta gularis*) for South America

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AT 3 P.M. ON WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 22, 1986, a group of 15 people on a birding tour of Trinidad observed a medium-sized, dark heron land and begin feeding in the "Pumpkin Patch" area of southern Nariva Swamp. This area, located at 10°23'N, 61°00'W on the eastern (Atlantic) coast of Trinidad, consists of dense mangrove swamp, mostly *Rhizophora mangle*, and extensive marsh dominated by threesquare, sedges, and rushes and crossed by a few drainage ditches. Along the ocean beach approximately 1.2 kilometers to the east are stands of coconut (*Cocos nucifera*), *Cyperus giganteus*, Moriche Palm (*Mauritia setigera*), Assai Palm (*Euterpe oleracea*), Caribbean Royal Palm (*Roystonea oleracea*), and the aroid *Montrichardia arborescens* (French 1980). Small, shallow pools scattered throughout the marsh contain small fish, aquatic insects, crabs, and other invertebrates and serve as feeding areas for a variety of long-legged waders as well as jacanas, gallinules, whistling-ducks and other wetland species.

The heron initially landed facing away from the group and was assumed to be an adult Tricolored Heron (*Egretta tricolor*) or Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*), both of which are regularly seen in Nariva Swamp. Further observation, however, revealed the following details: size similar to Little Blue or Tricolored heron; overall body color slate gray with prominent white chin and throat, the white area extending back to mid-neck and down two inches below base of bill; eyes lemon yellow; upper mandible blackish, lower mandible yellowish, beak overall heavier and more down-curved than those of Little Blue or Tricolored herons; lores dark grayish, inconspicuous; no nuptial plumes; somewhat lighter (whitish) on belly; wings bluish gray with brownish cast; legs black, feet yellow. In flight, a small white patch was conspicuous among otherwise slaty blue primary coverts of the right wing only. On the basis of these characters, Murphy tentatively identified the bird as a Western Reef-Heron in basic plumage.

The status of the Western Reef-Heron as a full species seems open to debate. The taxa recently has been recognized as a species in *American Birds* (Anonymous 1983; Cardillo *et al.* 1983; Norton 1985a, 1985b; Smith and Hutt 1984), in the *Auk* (A.O.U. 1985), and in at least two major works (Brown *et al.* 1982; Hancock and Elliott 1978). However, Hancock and Kushlan (1984) treat the "Western Reef-Heron" as a race of the Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*), naming it *Egretta garzetta gularis*. They state that "six races of this species are recognized of which three are all-white, and three (formerly considered as 'Western Reef' or 'Dimorphic' herons) are polymorphic." In any case, Brown *et al.* (1982) state: "Dark morph [of Western Reef-Heron] distinguishable from similar but rare melanistic or dark morph of Little Egret by heavier, distinctly downward curving bill, by conspicuous and well-defined white chin and throat and . . . by brown or yellow bill," all of which marks were clearly seen on the Trinidad bird.

During our observations the sky was cloudless, the wind light, and the sunlight was strong and from behind us. Prevailing winds during the previous week had been easterly and steady. Murphy took extensive notes on the spot as he observed the bird for about 10 minutes through his Questar® 90mm telescope at 65X from less than 100 meters. Nanan stalked to within 50 meters of the bird and obtained a series of photographs. The other tour participants observed the bird through binoculars from about 150 meters and subsequently verified our notes.

Gillmor's rendition of the adult Western Reef-Heron in Hancock and Elliott (1978) is consistent with the Trinidad bird except for the prominent nuptial plumes, which were lacking in the Trinidad bird. The brownish cast and whitish belly of the Trinidad bird fit the description in Brown *et al.* (1982) of the plumage of the dark morph immature: ". . . light brownish gray with white chin and throat, variable white on wings; rest of underparts mottled off-white." The single specimen in the collection of the U.S. National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., also has a brownish cast and whitish belly; Murphy examined that specimen on February 6 and March 24, 1986. These characters were also mentioned in regard to a bird seen in Barbados in 1984 (Smith and Hutt 1984).

In feeding, the heron resembled a Tricolored Heron, stalking slowly through the sedges and rushing to snatch minnows from the pools. It occasionally crouched forward in a manner similar to that maintained by fishing Green-backed Herons (*Butorides striatus*) so that it was partly hidden among the vegetation. It seemed quite unafraid, showing alarm only upon our close approach, at which time it stretched its neck out and stood erect until we withdrew. At no time did it call. The total period of observation was about 15 minutes. The heron eventually left without being flushed and flew northwest, further into the marsh. Efforts to relocate it on this and subsequent days were unsuccessful despite substantial efforts by Nanan.

Four other sightings of Western Reef-Heron have been reported for the Western Hemisphere, three from the Caribbean region. The first and second sightings, on Nantucket and Barbados, respectively, have been published (Cardillo

*et al.* 1983, Smith and Hutt 1984). The third and fourth sightings, both from St. Lucia (Norton 1985a), were reported by Derek Scott and P.W. Smith at the same location on February 18, 1984, and January 31, 1985, respectively. A fifth retrospective account (Norton 1985b) again mentions Barbados as a Lesser Antillean site in 1975.

#### *Nantucket Island Sighting*

Cardillo *et al.* (1983) reported on a Western Reef-Heron of the *gularis* race seen on Nantucket Island, Massachusetts, between April and October 1983. Their paper provides a list of characters by which several species of medium-sized herons in the genus *Egretta* may be differentiated. Also included is a discussion of hybridization between species of herons, color morphs, foraging behavior, distribution, a detailed description of the Nantucket Island bird and its discovery, and issues raised by the observation of this species so far from its normal range. Of particular interest relative to the present sighting is their mention of a brown cast to the body feathers and a whitish coloration on the rear flanks, characters consistent with the description in Brown *et al.* (1982) of the immature plumage.

The "clinchers" in the identification of the Nantucket bird were given as ". . . dark plumage, white throat, and colors of the bare parts . . ." and the more subjective characters of the bill's heaviness and curved appearance. . . ." These characters were all well seen on the Trinidad bird. The Nantucket bird spent most of its time in the immediate vicinity of a *Spartina* marsh and was seen only occasionally along the nearby sandy beach. In addition, it crouched in a manner similar to a Green-backed Heron. The Nantucket bird was reported to be tamer than nearby Snowy Egrets (*Egretta thula*).

A subsequent note (Anonymous 1983) suggested that the Nantucket bird could have been one of eight released by an animal dealer in West Germany. However, those individuals were determined (source of determination not given) to be of the Red Sea/India (*schistacea*) race, not the West African (*gularis*) race.

#### *Barbados Sightings*

A recent retrospective account provided by Norton (1985b) involves a sighting at Graeme Hall Swamp, Barbados, by R. Westmore *et al.* between June 29 and July 18, 1975, of a heron they considered then to be a hybrid Snowy Egret x Little Blue Heron but which now appears to have been a Western Reef-Heron. The Barbados site is approximately 365 kilometers from the Nariva Swamp site.

Also from Barbados, Smith and Hutt (1984) described two Western Reef-Herons, an adult and a subadult, seen in a heron roost during February and March 1984. Their subadult resembled our Trinidad bird, with a somewhat browner appearance and with duller soft parts than the alternate-plumage adult with which it associated. As in the case of the Trinidad bird, the Barbados birds fed in an inland swamp rather than along a rocky shoreline or coral reef, the habitat preferred in Africa.

#### *St. Lucia Sightings*

Derek Scott reported an immature Western Reef-Heron on February 18, 1984, at Vieux Fort on the island of St. Lucia, which lies 128 kilometers northwest of Barbados and 350 kilometers north of Trinidad (Norton 1985a). As Norton noted, that made three Western Reef-Herons sighted in a limited area of the Caribbean within days (including the Barbados sighting). Smith subsequently reported an adult and an immature at the same location on St. Lucia on January 31, 1985 (*Ibid.*).

#### *Miscellany*

A patch of white feathers on the outer leading edge of only the right wing of the Trinidad bird attracted our attention. This patch shows clearly in the photographs. We speculated that this plumage anomaly might have resulted from interspecific hybridization but discarded that hypothesis because of the lack of hybridizational symmetry—the lack of a mirror-image white patch on

the left wing Chandler S. Robbins (*pers. comm.*) noted that he has often seen such a patch on large birds that have struck power lines or tree branches. The resulting white patch consists of down feathers exposed when primaries and coverts are torn away by the collision. Such an accident could explain the white patch on the Trinidad bird.

Commander Michael B. Casement of the Royal Naval Birdwatching Society, an expert on the occurrence of landbirds on ships at sea, commented on our discovery as follows (*pers. comm.*):

“The heron family have special interest for me because they are regularly reported by ships at sea, sometimes making long oceanic passages as hitchhikers. The commonest reported to me is the Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) and Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*). I have several records midway between S. Africa and S. America of Cattle Egret and I am one of those who venture the theory that ship-assisted passages are a major factor in the explosive distribution of this species. Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) is reported on ships in the Mediterranean and off W. Africa, but I do not know of any instances of the dark polymorphic race such as yours (*E. g. gularis*). From the descriptions which reach me I would not dare to identify races, and I have to be content with species if and when possible. However, I think there must be a distinct possibility that your bird was assisted by a passing ship in order to reach Trinidad. This would be consistent with the many observations which reach me of other similar members of the heron family.”

These notes [and documentary photographs] will serve to document the first sighting of Western Reef-Heron for South America.

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