

**At first, Little Blue Herons show very little blue—they are mostly white. These young Little Blues can be strikingly similar to some Snowy Egrets, and also can be confused with the white-morph Reddish Egrets. There are potential challenges in identifying our summertime blue heron.**

ALTHOUGH THEY share two-thirds of an English name, the Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*) and Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) have little else in common. They are not close relatives, and they differ in major ways.

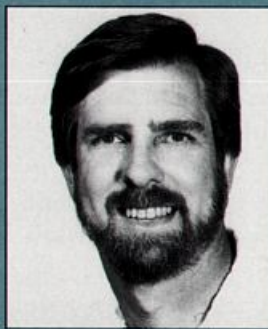
The Great Blue is only vaguely blue; it is colored much like its sister species from the Old World, the more-accurately-named Gray Heron. The Little Blue Heron, on the other hand, really is blue, but some would argue that it is not exactly a heron: It is more like an egret in disguise. But a major difference between Great and Little is revealed by winter range maps. Great Blue Herons can take the cold, and a few remain in winter north to the Maritimes, the Great Lakes, even Alaska. But Little Blues are

fair-weather birds, typical of summer climates. This *Practiced Eye* looks at the summertime bird, the Little Blue Heron, and the egrets with which it can be confused.

Young Little Blues show *very* little blue—in fact, none to begin with. This is the only heron species in the world in which the adults are dark and the juveniles are white. (That makes it, incidentally, the only heron that actually has a “white phase”: The word “phase” implies an element of time. Those Reddish Egrets [*Egretta rufescens*] that are white, on the other hand, are white all their lives, making them exam-

Kenn Kaufman

# THE PRACTICED EYE



## Summertime Blues

Photographs from VIREO and from BIRDS IN ART

ples of a white *morph*.) Young Little Blues can be strikingly similar to young Snowy Egrets (*Egretta thula*), and either can be confused with the young white-morph Reddish Egret. Adult Little Blues can look somewhat like *dark-morph* young Reddish Egrets. Clearly there are some potential challenges in identifying our summertime blue heron.

In size and proportions, Little Blue Heron and Snowy Egret are surprisingly similar. In most of North America the Snowy is the more common of the two, making the white young Little Blue an easy bird to overlook. Even on closer inspection, it can be a tough call at times.

Bill color is *usually* helpful. Typically, the immature Little Blue has extensive gray to blue-gray on the lores and the basal half of the bill, with the rest

of the bill black. Typically, the Snowy Egret has a mostly-black bill, contrasting with yellow lores. But both species are variable. Little Blue may have the bill more than half black, or the base may be off-white or dull greenish; the gray lores often show a bit of yellow near the eye. Snowy Egret, especially when young, may have the basal half of the bill pale gray or pale yellow. But the lores are virtually always yellow on Snowy Egret, mostly gray on Little Blue Heron.

Bill *shape* is worth noticing. The difference is subtle, but Little Blue Heron's bill is usually slightly thick-



**Portrait of an adult Little Blue Heron. As a heron that might be best considered a type of dark-plumaged egret, this is a bird of warm climates, characteristic of summertime over much of its range. Photograph/Steven Holt/VIREO.**

er at the base, making the slight droop in the bill a little more apparent. All bets are off, however, with the youngest birds, just out of the nest: When Snowies or Little Blues (or any other herons) have just fledged, they are likely to be shorter-billed than the adults, and their bill colors may be odd also. The



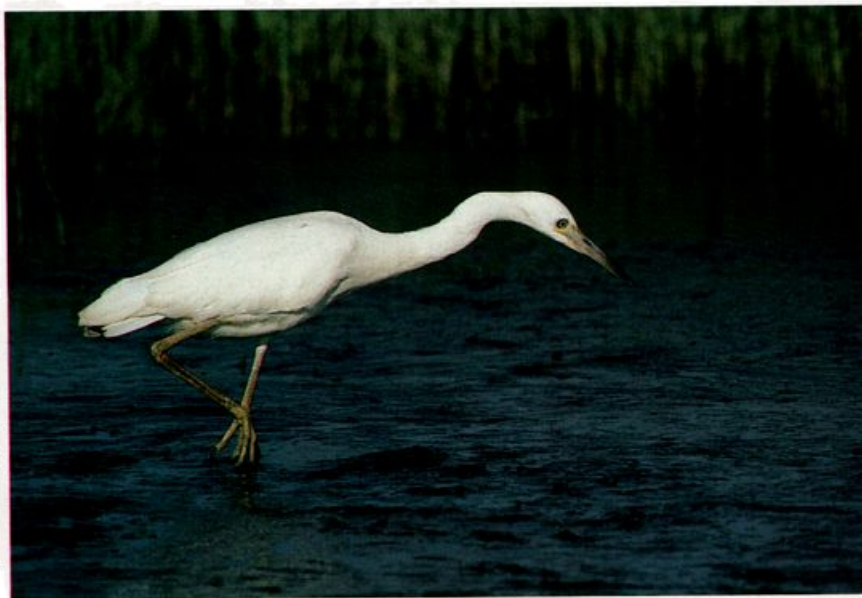
**Like reverse carbon copies are these two Little Blue Herons, the white immature and the dark adult. It will take the young bird about two years to reach full adult plumage. Photograph/Arthur Morris/Birds As Art.**

youngest Snowies may have the bill mostly yellow. Recently-fledged young must always be identified with caution.

Leg color is a good, but tricky, field mark. Immature Little Blues have dull yellow-green legs. On adult Snowy Egrets the legs are mostly black, but on immatures

they are mostly yellow-green, with only a stripe of black up the front; the black may be hard to see at a distance. There have been Snowies seen with entirely yellow legs (see Middle Pacific Coast regional report in this issue), which could complicate matters.

When they are close to one year



**Immature Little Blue Heron in the typical foraging posture, leaning forward and looking down at the water. The legs are greenish-yellow, lacking the black stripe up the front shown by the legs of Snowy Egret. However, the hint of yellow near the eye might be misleading, bringing to mind the yellow lores of Snowy Egret. At the moment, the wingtips on this bird are covered by the long tertials, making the dusky primary tips virtually invisible. Photograph/Arthur Morris/Birds As Art.**



**Immature Little Blue Heron. This bird has the classic blue-gray lores and basal half of the bill. The arrangement of the wing feathers at this moment reveals the gray tips of the outer primaries, a good distinction from Snowy Egret when visible. Photograph/Crawford H. Greenewalt/VIREO.**



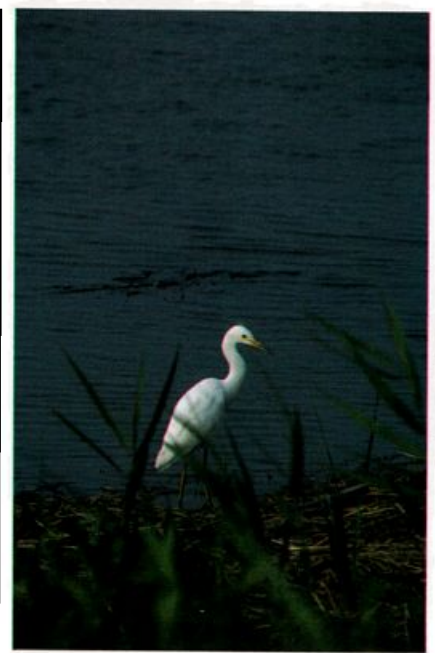
**Little Blue Heron in its so-called "calico" phase, in transition to the dark plumage of adulthood. Birds in this stage are roughly one to two years old. The dark blue in the plumage comes in as a smudgy wash on the head, neck, and body, but as solid blocks of color on the wings, reflecting the different structure of the feathers in these areas. Photograph/Steven Holt/VIREO.**

old, Little Blues molt in a new plumage that includes a mix of white and dark feathers. In this pied plumage (the "calico phase"), which will last for most of the next year, they are easily separated from Snowy Egrets. Before that stage, for the year or so that they are all-white, Little Blues show only one plumage difference from Snowy Egret: *dusky wingtips*. These gray wingtips of the immature Little Blue have been mistreated in popular bird guides—some show them as strikingly obvious, some fail to show them at all. In reality, the gray tips on the outermost primaries can be fairly noticeable, but they are often covered by the long tertials on the folded wing, making them all but invisible even at close range. It may be necessary to watch a young Little Blue for some time before it reshuffles its wing feathers and makes the gray wingtips visible.

With a good view, telling young Snowy Egrets and Little Blue



**Adult Snowy Egret. This species is an active feeder, often moving about quickly in the shallows and shuffling its feet to stir things up. Little Blue Heron tends to be more sedate, standing still and staring down at the water for long periods. Photograph/Frank K. Schleicher/VIREO.**



**Juvenile Snowy Egret. Photographed in July, this bird apparently has been out of the nest only a short time. Its bill is still mostly yellow, and is shorter than it would be on an adult. Photograph/Arthur Morris/Birds As Art.**

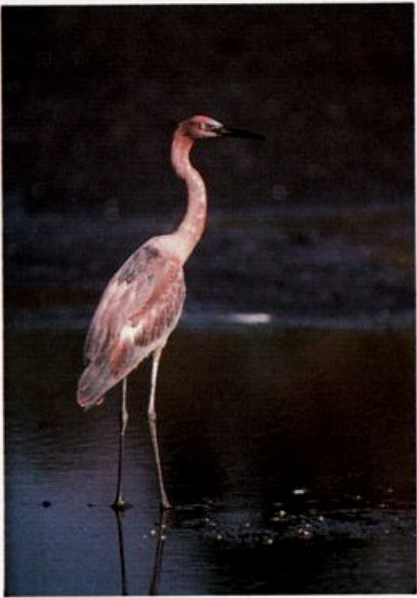
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Hérons apart is usually straightforward. But all the main field marks—bill color, bill shape, leg color, and wingtips—are subject to some variation. Immature Little Blues seen outside their normal range should be studied for all field marks, not just identified on the strength of one or two.

Reddish Egret, a salt-water wader of southern coastlines, is not often considered difficult. But its trademark pink-and-black bill pattern is mainly apparent on breeding adults; the bill is darker and duller on non-breeders and especially on immatures. The shaggy neck plumes of adults are also lacking on immatures, so these young birds can be somewhat obscure. Dark-morph immatures have patchy gray and rufous tones, imparting a ratty look that gives them away. But white-morph young Reddish Egrets might be passed off as either Snowy Egrets or immature Little Blues. Bill shape is



**Reddish Egret.** This dark-morph immature shows none of the shaggy neck plumes and none of the bright pink bill-base that will make the breeding adult so easy to identify. It might be confused with the adult Little Blue Heron, except that its bill is too straight, and its neck and legs are too long for that species. Photograph/Arthur Morris/VIREO.

helpful here, since the bill of the Reddish Egret is very straight and rather heavy for most of its length. The lores are usually fairly dark on this species. Reddish Egrets are also relatively long-legged and long-necked, with a rangy appearance, while the other two species look more compact.

Advanced heron-watchers will want to watch out for some tricky additional sources of confusion in this group. Snowy Egret and Little Blue Heron occasionally interbreed, and the resulting hybrids can look intermediate between their parents in a variety of ways. Such hybrids could, for example, look somewhat like the Western Reef-Heron (*Egretta gularis*)—an Old World species that has turned up once in Massachusetts and several times in the Caribbean. The mere possibility of such oddities gives us good reason to take time to learn the common herons thoroughly, to take a second look at every bird



**White morph of the Reddish Egret.** The bill of this bird lacks the strongly bicolored effect of the breeding adult, showing only a trace of pink near the base of the lower mandible. At first glance the bird might be passed off as a Snowy Egret or immature Little Blue Heron, but its bill is too heavy and straight, its lores are too dark, and the amount of leg showing above the intertarsal joint seems too long. Photograph/E. Bartels/VIREO.



**Slaty like a Little Blue Heron but with yellow feet like a Snowy Egret—could this be a hybrid?** The two species have been known to hybridize, but this individual was a Western Reef-Heron, the first ever found in North America, in Massachusetts in 1983: evidence that supposed hybrids must be approached with caution. Photograph/Rob Cardillo/VIREO.

VIREO (Visual Resources for Ornithology), at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, is the world's first and foremost scientific collection of bird photographs. Established in 1979, the collection now holds well over 100,000 images, representing about half of the world's bird species. For more background, see the feature on VIREO by J. P. Myers *et al.* in *American Birds* Volume 38, Number 3, May-June 1984.