

## NOTES

### A WHITE GREEN HERON IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

KIMBALL L. GARRETT, Section of Vertebrates, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, 900 Exposition Blvd., Los Angeles, California 90007

Albinism, leucism, and other patterns of pigment reduction are widespread among birds, with examples having been documented for 50 avian families in North America alone, representing well over 245 species (Ross 1963). Recurring pigment reduction within populations may have interesting behavioral and evolutionary implications (Graves 1992, Holyoak 1978), but most publications documenting albinism and leucism seek simply to add to a growing registry of affected species. Of more direct concern to the field ornithologist are cases in which albinistic individuals resemble other species, confusing species-level identification (Garrett 1990). Here I report a leucistic or "partial albino" Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*) at Malibu Lagoon, Los Angeles County, California, and discuss implications of this unusual plumage for species identification. A review of Palmer (1962), Ross (1963), Hancock and Elliott (1978), Cramp and Simmons (1977), Brown et al. (1982), and Marchant and Higgins (1990) revealed no previous records of albinism or leucism in the *Butorides striatus* species complex, within which *B. virescens* is again considered specifically distinct (Monroe and Browning 1992, AOU 1993). I did not undertake an exhaustive search of regional literature.

I discovered the unusual heron at this small coastal estuary on 15 August 1992; seven normally plumaged Green Herons were present at the lagoon the same day. Kiff and Nakamura (1979) considered this species a "common resident" there. Hal Spear observed and photographed (Figure 1) the bird the same day. In size, shape, and behavior the bird was a typical *Butorides*; it was not heard to call. Its plumage was entirely pure white except for an inconspicuous line of dark feathering on the forecrown, extending back just posterior to the eye. The following bare-part and soft-part colors were recorded in the field: bill bright yellow basally and somewhat duller yellow distally, with dusky along the culmen and at the base of the maxilla; eyes bright yellow; a patch of bright green skin between the eye and the bill; legs bright yellow-green.

Many species of herons and egrets are essentially pure white in plumage, either in all plumages (Great Egret, *Casmerodius albus*; many species of *Egretta*), as immatures (Little Blue Heron, *Egretta caerulea*), in basic plumage (Cattle Egret, *Bubulcus ibis*), or as one particular morph (e.g., Reddish Egret, *E. rufescens*). Apart from the inconspicuous area of dark feathering on the forecrown, the Malibu Lagoon heron matched the pure white plumage of other local white small herons (Snowy and Cattle Egrets) and could easily have been dismissed as one of those species. Bare-part colors vary notably with age and season within the Ardeidae (Hancock and Kushlan 1984, Palmer 1962, McVaugh 1972) and must be used cautiously for species identification. However, the bare part colors of the Malibu Lagoon heron, as described above, fall outside the range of the Snowy or Cattle Egret or any local ardeid besides *Butorides*. The extensive yellow on the bill may suggest a hatching-year bird or be the result of the unusual melanin reduction. The bird's shape, including the relatively large bill, short legs, and hunched posture were the most

NOTES



Figure 1. White Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*) at Malibu Lagoon, Los Angeles County, California, 15 August 1992.

*Photos by Hal Spear*

## NOTES

obvious factors confirming its identification as a Green Heron. The foraging behavior, slow stalking and motionless prey-searching at the water's edge or in very shallow water, was also typical for this species.

I thank Nancy Spear for additional information on this sighting and for permission to publish the photographs. The photographs were cheerfully obtained, at my request, by the late Hal Spear. Hal's contributions to field ornithology and bird conservation in the Los Angeles area were many, and he is missed; this note is dedicated to his memory.

### LITERATURE CITED

- American Ornithologists' Union. 1993. Thirty-ninth supplement to the American Ornithologists' Union *Check-list of North American Birds*. *Auk* 110:675-682.
- Brown, L. H., Urban, E. K., and Newman, K. 1982. *The Birds of Africa*, vol. 1. Academic Press, London.
- Cramp, S., and Simmons, K. E. L. 1977. *Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa*, vol 1. Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, England.
- Garrett, K. L. 1990. Leucistic Black-vented Shearwaters (*Puffinus opisthomelas*) in southern California. *W. Birds* 21:69-72.
- Graves, G. R. 1992. The endemic landbirds of Henderson Island, southeastern Polynesia: Notes on natural history and conservation. *Wilson Bull.* 104:32-43.
- Hancock, J., and Elliott, H. 1978. *The Herons of the World*. Harper and Row, New York.
- Hancock, J., and Kushlan, J. 1984. *The Herons Handbook*. Harper and Row, New York.
- Holyoak, D. T. 1978. Variable albinism of the flight feathers as an adaptation for recognition of individual birds in some Polynesian populations of *Acrocephalus* warblers. *Ardea* 66:112-117.
- Kiff, L. F., and Nakamura, K. 1979. The birds of Malibu Lagoon. *Audubon Imprint* 4(2):1-13.
- Marchant, S., and Higgins, P. J. 1990. *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds*, vol. 1, Ratites to Ducks. Oxford Univ. Press Australia, Melbourne.
- McVaugh, W. 1973. The development of four North American herons. *Living Bird* 11:155-173.
- Monroe, B. L., Jr., and Browning, M. R. 1992. A re-analysis of *Butorides*. *Bull. Br. Ornithol. Club* 112:81-85.
- Palmer, R. S., ed. 1962. *Handbook of North American Birds*, vol. 1. Yale Univ. Press, New Haven.
- Ross, C. C. 1963. Albinism among North American birds. *Cassinia* 47:2-21.

*Accepted 30 July 1994*