

Cattle Egret, *Bubulcus ibis*

Status:

State: Threatened

Federal: Stable, no status

Identification

Cattle Egrets are a medium-sized, stocky bird with white plumage, a stout yellow bill and grayish or black legs. Its breeding plumage consists of ruddy or orange colored feathers on its breast and in the plumes at the crown of its head and legs that turn an orangey-red. Males and females are about the same size, which is anywhere from 18-22 inches tall with a wingspan of about 3 feet.

Juveniles appear the same as non-breeding adults. The call of the cattle egret is described as a

quiet, throaty "rick-rack", though they don't often vocalize outside of the nesting colony.



© Scott Whittle

Habitat

Although this heron appears similar in size, shape or color to many of the other herons and egrets that occur in New Jersey, it is quite different from them in regard to habitat and foraging needs. Unlike other herons and egrets that spend a fair amount of time in or near coastal, riverine, lake or estuarine systems this species is more comfortable in agriculture fields and pastures. In New Jersey they will nest in mixed species colonies on marsh islands of the Atlantic coast but much of their foraging and roosting time is spent further inland. They have developed a relationship with cattle, horses and even tractors, which is based on the ability of the larger animal/machine to stir up insects and other prey, which the cattle egret will then feed upon. It is a unique partnership and one that allowed the egrets to embark on a natural range expansion as large scale livestock practices spread through the world. Another enterprising tactic is to head towards smoke, which might indicate a fire that insects will likely be trying to escape. The egrets capitalize on this evacuation and make short work of the fleeing bugs. Finally, the ability of cattle egrets to adapt to local prey sources probably allowed its expansion to be so successful, as it has also been known to eat small birds or chicks when other prey is not available.

Status and Conservation

This species was once confined to the African and Asian continents (and a very small portion of Europe) but underwent a natural expansion and by the late 1800s was first observed in

South America. It was reported in the United States by the 1940s and was confirmed nesting by the 1950s. It also expanded to other portions of the world, including Australia, New Zealand, south Pacific islands and Israel. Over the last few decades, cattle egrets became very common around the US, including in New Jersey. However, land use has shifted in the state and there are fewer livestock farms than there once were, presumably leading to the rapid decline of cattle egrets observed nesting in the state in recent years. This steep downturn led to the state listing the species as threatened during the breeding season in 2012. It does not have a federal designation as threatened or endangered. Surrounding states (such as NY, MA, DE, MD and VA) have not yet listed this species. Due to its large range and apparent security in other regions where livestock is more common, the IUCN lists this species as “Least Concern” on its Red List. The North American Waterbird Plan groups it with species that are “not currently at risk”. However, some of these listings may not have been subject to recent review and regional declines in the species population suggest that its status may be downgraded in some places and in some plans.