

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

CATTLE EGRET

Bubulcus ibis

Family: ARDEIDAE
B057

Order: PELECANIFORMES

Class: AVES

Written by: S. Granholm

Reviewed by: D. Raveling, L. Mewaldt

Edited by: R. Duke

DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

The cattle egret is a common yearlong resident near the Salton Sea, and also breeds locally in San Diego, Riverside, and San Bernardino cos., in the Central Valley, and at Humboldt Bay (Garrett and Dunn 1981). An uncommon to common winter resident, or visitor, elsewhere in the Central Valley and along the coast of California. Feeds mostly in pastures (especially near cattle), irrigated croplands (especially when flooded), and herbaceous habitats. Rarely seen along the shores of lacustrine and slow-moving riverine habitats, but not in standing water. It was first recorded in California about 1964 and first found nesting in 1970, at the Salton Sea (Garrett and Dunn 1981). It is now the most common nesting ardeid in that region, and is very common yearlong .

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Prefers large insects and other arthropods but also eats worms, amphibians, reptiles, and small mammals. Often feeds near large mammals, especially cattle, making quick dashes to capture prey animals that are flushed. Sometimes feeds away from cattle, especially where irrigation water or grass fires flush prey. Almost always feeds in moist or dry, open fields, avoiding standing water. In Florida, frequents garbage dumps.

Cover: Roosts in trees, usually beside water, especially flooded trees. Often rests in same habitat where it feeds.

Reproduction: Nests of twigs and small sticks are built in dense-canopied trees, or tall shrubs, near good feeding areas (Cogswell 1977), usually beside aquatic or wetland habitats.

Water: No additional data found.

Pattern: Requires trees or tall shrubs for roosting and nesting, near good feeding areas, and preferably near water.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Local migrator. October to March or April, disperses widely from breeding colonies.

Home Range: No information found.

Territory: Breeding territory, used for courtship, copulation, and nesting, consists of only the immediate vicinity around the nest (Palmer 1962).

Reproduction: Nests April to July at Salton Sea (Cogswell 1977). Monogamous, colonial nester. Clutch size averaged 3.0 to 3.5 in 3 studies in Florida, and ranged 2-6 (Maxwell and Kale 1977); average was 2.4-2.9 in studies reviewed by Weber (1975). Usually single brooded, and incubates 23-25 days, averaging 24 (Weber 1975). Semi-altricial, downy young tended by both parents. They can fly at about 40 days, and are independent at about 60 days. Age at first breeding unknown.

Niche: According to Garrett and Dunn (1981), this species largely has displaced the snowy egret from the best nesting sites at the Salton Sea, since first nesting there in 1970. In New Jersey, it is more aggressive than other ardeids and ibises, and usually wins competition for stick nests (Burger 1978). Weber (1975), however, observed very little competition for nests with other ardeids in a colony in Florida. In addition to feeding near cattle and other livestock, this species eats flies on, and near, elephant seals and sea lions on the Channel Islands (Stewart and Kovach 1982).

Comments: Formerly confined to the Old World, the cattle egret colonized South America in the present century, apparently without human help, and rapidly expanded its range to the north. Although currently it is rare and irregular east of the Sierra Nevada and in the northern third of California, its numbers apparently are increasing.

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