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OCCURRENCE OF LITTLE EGRET IN HAWKE'S BAY.

By D. H. Brathwaite, Napier.

In October, 1951, while in Melbourne, I visited the Altona Salt-works with members of the Bird Observers' Club. Amongst the birds observed there, I saw a little egret (*Egretta garzetta*) and noticed (with rather mixed emotions) that it appeared to be identical with a bird which had frequented the Ahuriri Lagoon, Napier, during the preceding months of June-September, in association with three white herons (*E. alba*). At that time the white heron itself was a new bird to me and its reputed rarity made a group of three of them an exciting enough occurrence; it never occurred to me until I saw *garzetta* in Melbourne that the smaller, black-billed, but otherwise similar bird with the white herons might be anything but a juvenile.

After my return to New Zealand, I was fortunate in seeing the bird once more, on December 19, and examination through binoculars strengthened my suspicion that it could be a little egret. This tentative opinion, together with a description, was forwarded to Dr. Falla, who informed me that it was definitely not a juvenile *alba* which has "the beak completely yellow, and bright at that, and in any case does not differ appreciably in size from adults." Subsequent correspondence with Dr. Falla and others resulted in the conclusion that the bird was probably *E. garzetta*, but that the plumed egret (*E. intermedia*) could not entirely be eliminated as a possibility. The white phase of the reef heron (*D. sacra*) also was not

altogether ruled out but was considered unlikely for various reasons which need not be enumerated, consequent on the bird's reappearance.

On June 7 this year the bird was again located, this time on the bed of the Tuki Tuki River, in company with a white heron, and has been seen since by myself, on June 15 in the same place, and on July 26 on Ahuriri Lagoon. Several other people have also reported seeing it in June and July. The following description has been compiled from field notes made on the various occasions when favourable views have been obtained:—

A "miniature" of the white heron, identical in proportions but appearing only about half the size. Bare skin of face, and base of bill is yellow; distal three-quarters of bill, black. Legs black or blackish-slate, according to light, and projecting conspicuously beyond the tail in flight. Flight of typical heron type but wing-beats rather more rapid than usual.

The long legs eliminate the white reef heron as a possibility; in that species the legs are shorter and do not project noticeably beyond the tail in flight. So far as the plumed egret is concerned, Glenister (1951, p. 102) and Hachisuka (1932, vol. i., p. 355) both state that the bill is black in the breeding season. Dr. Falla (in litt.) says that in *alba* the black bill could not possibly survive the breeding season, and as *intermedia* has rarely if ever been observed in Australia with the bill any colour but yellow, it seems likely that the black bill is equally transitory in that species. In *garzetta* the bill is permanently black; the individual observed at Napier from June to September, and December, 1951, and again in June-July, 1952, has had the bill black whenever seen. Another field character reported for *intermedia* is that the tibia is paler than the tarsus, though various authorities differ slightly as to the exact colours. This feature has been looked for since the bird reappeared this year, but, so far as I can ascertain the legs are uniformly dark. No ornamental plumes have been noted at any time since the bird was first seen.

In view of the fact that in two successive winters the bird has retained the bill colours of *garzetta*, and that I have been able to detect no difference in the colour between tibia and tarsus, there seems little doubt that its identification as the little egret is justifiable.

Mr. E. L. Kehoe, of Greymouth, informs me (in litt.) that a bird of similar appearance has been seen in Westland this year. The bird was observed in July at Lake Ryan, near Greymouth, and about a week later the same bird (or another of similar size) was noted with a white heron near Westport. In the latter case, however, the colour of legs and bill could not be determined.

It seems likely that the recent marked increase in white herons seen throughout New Zealand may be explained by an invasion from Australia, and the occurrence of one, and possibly two, little egrets appears to support this view.

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THE SOCIETY'S ACTIVITIES.

Many of the society's investigations and inquiries are designed to enable as many members as possible to help, and to make their knowledge known. Members are invited to participate in all the following projects:—

PERMANENT INVESTIGATIONS.

RINGING.—A considerable number of black-billed and red-billed gulls, white-fronted tern, banded dotterel and pied stilts have been ringed in