

## SHORT NOTES

### LITTLE EGRET AT GREYMOUTH

A Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) was found by me at the abattoir paddock on 15/5/60. The day was very hazy although fine. The bird was first seen when preening its neck feathers and I was struck by its slight build as compared with a White Heron (*E. alba*). The Little Egret was scary and I was not able to get near to it for a start. However, it flew a short distance and landed on a lagoon edge near a road. This enabled me to obtain a view from about fifteen yards and to get a closer look at its bill, which is not nearly as heavy as that of a White Heron. In the afternoon I was able to make a comparison with a White-faced Heron when the two were feeding in the same shallow pool, ignoring the vigorous protests of a Pied Stilt.

From a range of ten to fifteen yards I used a 20X telescope and 10 x 50 binoculars. The Little Egret is of much the same height as the White-faced Heron but has a slighter body although they appear much the same until the Little Egret unfolds its neck, which adds to the apparent body size. The tip of the bill was black on both mandibles. The upper mandible was black for about two thirds of its length, then changed to patchy orange and black before changing to yellow orange, which was the same colour as the skin on its face. The lower mandible, apart from the black tip, was more of a lemon colour, and at medium range, without the use of binoculars, did not show. The effect was to give the appearance of a slightly down-curved bill as the black on the upper mandible and the black on the tip of the bottom mandible showed up reasonably well. The iris appeared to be a lemon colour. The plumage was white and at times there appeared to be a partial ruff at the bottom front half of the neck. Small plumes were developing in a tuft at the nape at about the same level as a line through from the mid-line of its bill. These were quite difficult to see unless the bird was at a favourable angle and would be about one inch to one and a half inches long. It appeared to raise a crest at times, but this was possibly caused by the wind blowing in behind its head feathers. The plumes were showing when all other feathers were lowered. The legs were a dark grey but at the back on the tarsus and slightly above appeared to have a greenish colour hard to describe — perhaps a gas-cape green. The feet appeared to be yellowish green underneath but this was hard to tell, as the feet were seen at about forty yards as the bird changed from a one-legged resting position to a two-legged stance. In flight the Little Egret shows more slender wings and a shorter and quicker wing beat than that of the White Heron. The flight of the White-faced Heron is much more bouncy — slow bounces.

On 19th and 20th May, 1960, I located the Little Egret at Cobden Lagoon, where it appeared to be keeping company with White-faced Herons, though it was moving about quite a bit because of their alert nature. However, it was feeding at times about twenty yards from a White Heron, so that a comparison of stance and feeding was facilitated. The Little Egret appears much smaller than the White Heron and is a much more active bird. It carries itself in a purposeful but almost furtive manner and keeps its neck tucked in and head held low. It kicks the weed to stir out fishes (a White-faced Heron habit)

and may gallop quickly after them, before making a thrust with its low-held head. This constant activity and quick walking down the pool is quite unlike the normal movements of a White Heron, which walks slowly and carries itself erect, holding its neck and bill high. The neck appears to have a backwards kink in it about two thirds of the way to the head. While fishing the bird is very deliberate and is stationary frequently. It holds its head high with neck outstretched, slowly reaches forward and out while lowering its head somewhat and flexing the neck a little, then catches its food with a swift thrust. Once only, in many hours of observation, have I seen a White Heron run. It caught a fair sized Yellow-eyed Mullet (commonly referred to hereabouts as a Herring) and attempted to change its grip, but dropped the fish, which left a "v" shape in the shallow water as it made off rapidly. The White Heron ran in a most ungainly fashion for about ten yards then gave up, assuming what appeared to be a most indignant attitude. The heavier orange bill, heavier body, more upright stance, and generally more deliberate movement aid identification of the White Heron. Perhaps the manner of carrying its head held high is the most important feature. The Little Egret keeps its head low.

It appeared that if the Little Egret and White Heron came into competition for food supplies, then the Little Egret would get more than its share in shallow waters.

— P. GRANT



#### ANTING OF STARLINGS AND CHAFFINCH

I have been very interested in the notes on "Anting" as, from 18th December, 1959, until 27th April, 1960, Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) were anting about 30 feet away from my kitchen window. The performance took place at any hour of the day from 8 a.m. until 5.45 p.m. and the procedure was similar to that described by Bathgate (*Notornis VIII*, 265) except that the birds, if disturbed, immediately flew off.

The most spectacular exhibition I was fortunate enough to witness was that of a Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*) where the bird was much more excited and appeared to be in a greater frenzy than the Starlings.

All the anting was done in one particular portion of my neighbour's lawn under and to one side of a maple. During December and January, when the Starlings were accompanied by young, in no case did the young birds "ant." From my observations, the young Starlings had almost completely attained adult plumage before they began anting.

Although Blackbirds (*Turdus merula*) were frequently feeding in this particular area, at no time did I ever see a Blackbird ant.

— L. E. WALKER



#### FEMALE CHAFFINCH SINGING

Among other birds a pair of Chaffinches (*Fringilla coelebs*) resident in the garden is attracted by kitchen scraps suitable for bird food put out on the lawn. On 15/8/59 the hen settled on the short grass and moved about seven feet to the food, singing as she went. While feeding she continued with short bursts of song. The usual final notes of the full song were not added. The movement of her bill and