

SHORT NOTE

First records of eastern cattle egret (*Bubulcus ibis coromandus*) in the Solomon Islands

SCOTT C. BUTCHER

Pacific Planning and Community Development Solutions, 31a Bay View Road, Atawhai, Nelson 7010, New Zealand

ANDREW C. CROSSLAND*

Parks Biodiversity Team, Parks Unit, Christchurch City Council, PO Box 73011, Christchurch 8154, New Zealand

PHILIP CRUTCHLEY

Regional Parks Team, Parks Unit, Christchurch City Council, PO Box 73014, Christchurch 8154, New Zealand

NIALL D. MUGAN

Keystone Ecology, 326 Halswell Rd, Halswell, Christchurch 8025, New Zealand

The cattle egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) is a medium-sized heron that has greatly expanded its global range over the last century and is now found on six continents (Ahmed 2011; Scofield 2013). While some authorities split cattle egret into two species (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), Birds New Zealand recognises three sub-species of which the eastern cattle egret (*B. i. coromandus*) of Asia and Australia is the sub-species found in New Zealand and the Pacific Islands (Checklist Committee OSNZ 2022). Within the South-West Pacific region, cattle egrets began appearing in both New Zealand and the

island of New Guinea as non-breeding migrants from the 1960s onwards (Gill *et al.* 2010; Pratt & Beehler 2015). The species has not established a breeding population in New Zealand to date, but has recently been discovered breeding in Papua New Guinea (Dutson 2019). Elsewhere in the region, cattle egrets have been recorded as vagrants in the Bismarck Archipelago, Manus Island, New Caledonia, Fiji, and some of the Micronesian island groups (Dutson & Watling 2007; Dutson 2011; van Perlo 2011; Tarburton 2021).

Recent reviews of the Solomon Islands avifauna by Doughty *et. al* (1999) and Tarburton (2021) did not include cattle egret, but Dutson (2011) added the species on the basis of an undated report of a

Received 10 June 2021; accepted 1 March 2023

*Correspondence: andrew.crossland@ccc.govt.nz

vagrant reported from Guadalcanal. This record is a single individual observed and photographed amongst cattle by a Birdquest tour group at the Betikama Wetlands (09°26.40'S, 160°02.06'E) east of Honiara, Guadalcanal on or around 5 October 2009 (Dutson *in litt.* February 2023). This sighting was listed in the company's trip report (van Beirs 2009), with the annotation that "A nice patch of marsh held an Eastern Cattle Egret (probably a first for the islands!), I am not aware of any previous records in the Solomon Islands."

There appear to be no further records of cattle egret in the Solomon Islands until 28 April 2014 when SCB observed a single cattle egret in flight close to the entrance of the Seventh Day Adventist College near Betikama Wetlands. Three months later on 9 July 2014, at least one cattle egret (precise number not specified) was reported at Betikama Wetlands by a visiting overseas birder (Hottola 2014). On 19 October 2014 SCB observed three cattle egrets at the same location. These were feeding in a receding water-lily swamp, with two great egrets (*Ardea alba*) and purple swamphens (*Porphyrio melanotus*). A few months later from 26 February to 4 March 2015 we surveyed wetland birds in the lowlands east and west of Honiara (Crossland *et al.* 2016). We actively searched for egret species on various grassland, wetland, coastal, and riverine habitats to ascertain whether any more were present in the wider area. Our only cattle egret sighting was of two birds on 26 February 2015, flushed from the roadside and flying into trees near Betikama Adventist College. Habitat in the immediate environs comprised pasture and market gardens, with the Betikama Wetlands approximately 800 m to the south.

Subsequent reports of cattle egret in and around Betikama Wetlands included three on 5 July 2015 (Van Beirs 2015; Petersson 2015), three on 6–7 July 2017 (Davies 2017a; 2017b), and eight observed in the non-specific "Honiara city and hills" eBird hotspot on 12 July 2018 (Perrins 2018). To date there appear to be no records from other parts of Guadalcanal, nor from any other island in the Solomons chain, including Bougainville (Hadden 1981, 2004; Tarburton 2021). While residing in Choiseul Province for two years SCB never recorded cattle egrets on visits to the north and south coast of Choiseul or from monthly wetland counts on Taro Island.

The records of cattle egret in the Solomon Islands from 2009 to the present, suggest the occurrence of a single bird at Betikama Wetlands on Guadalcanal in 2009 (fate unknown), then three birds at the same location from 2014–2017, followed by the arrival of more birds to a maximum of 8 in July 2018. There have been no subsequent reports, but COVID-19 travel restrictions since early 2020 likely means that numbers of visiting ornithologists are few. The cluster of sightings at just one site,

Betikama Wetlands, seems coincidental, but it is probably an artefact of very limited open grassland habitat in the country, the relatively large size and intactness of Betikama compared to other wetlands on Guadalcanal (Scott 1993; Butcher *et al.* 2018), and strong observer bias to this fairly easily accessible site close to the country's only sizable city and international airport (Dutson 2011; Hotolla 2014).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks to the editor of *Notornis*, Guy Dutson, and Paul Scofield for comments and suggested improvements on this manuscript.

LITERATURE CITED

- Ahmed, R. 2011. Subspecific identification and status of Cattle Egret. *Dutch Birding* 33: 294–304.
- Butcher, S.; Crossland, A.C.; Crutchley, P.; Mugan, N.D. 2018. First records of little black cormorant (*Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*) for the Solomon Islands. *Notornis* 65: 109–112.
- Checklist Committee (OSNZ). 2022. *Checklist of the Birds of New Zealand* (5th edition). Ornithological Society of New Zealand Occasional Publication No.1. Wellington, Ornithological Society of New Zealand.
- Crossland, A.C.; Butcher, S.; Crutchley, P.; Mugan, N.D. Kake, J. 2016. A survey of waders on part of Guadalcanal and The Florida Group, Solomon Islands. *Stilt* 69–70: 47–55.
- Davies, C. 2017a. *Betikama Wetlands, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands*. eBird Field Checklist. Online at <https://ebird.org/checklist/S38437751>
- Davies, C. 2017b. *Betikama Wetlands, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands*. eBird Field Checklist. Online at <https://ebird.org/checklist/S38437860>
- Doughty, C.; Day, N.; Plant, A. 1999. *The Birds of the Solomons, Vanuatu and New Caledonia*. London, Christopher Helm.
- Dutson, G. 2011. *Birds of Melanesia: Bismarcks, Solomons, Vanuatu and New Caledonia*. New Jersey, Princeton University Press.
- Dutson, G.; Watling, D. 2007. Cattle egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) and other vagrant birds in Fiji. *Notornis* 54: 54–55.
- Dutson, G. 2019. *Royal Port Moresby Golf Club*. eBird Field Checklist. Online at <https://ebird.org/checklist/S62208144>.
- Gill, B.J. (Convener); Bell, B.D.; Chambers, G.K.; Medway, D.G.; Palma, R.L.; Scofield, R.P.; Tennyson, A.J.D.; Worthy, T.H. 2010. *Checklist of the Birds of New Zealand, Norfolk and Macquarie Islands, and the Ross Dependency, Antarctica*. 4th edition. Wellington, Ornithological Society of New Zealand and Te Papa Press.
- Hadden, D. 1981. Birds of the North Solomons, Wau, Wau Ecology Institute.
- Hadden, D. 2004. *Birds and Bird Lore of Bougainville*

- and the North Solomons. Alderley, Dove Publications Pty Limited.
- Hottola, P. 2014. *Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, in July 2014*. Online at <https://www.club300.se/media/9443/guadalcanal.pdf>. Accessed: 28 March 2021.
- Perrins, N.D. 2018. *Honiara City and Hills. Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands. ebird Field Checklist*. Online at <https://ebird.org/checklist/S47248144>.
- Petersson, L. 2015. Eastern Cattle Egret image. Online at <https://www.larsfoto.se/en/gallery/bird-images-from-foreign-trips/solomon-islands/9258-eastern-cattle-egret> Accessed: 28 March 2021.
- Pratt, T.K.; Beehler, B.M. 2015. *Birds of New Guinea, 2nd edition*. Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press.
- Rasmussen, P.C.; Anderton, J.C. 2012. *Birds of South Asia: The Ripley Guide*. 2nd edition. Washington D.C. and Barcelona, Smithsonian Institution and Lynx Edicions.
- Scofield, R. 2013. Cattle egret [updated 2022]. In: Miskelly, C.M. (ed.) *New Zealand Birds Online*. Online at www.nzbirdsonline.org.nz. Accessed: 10 February 2023.
- Scott, D.A. 1993. *A Directory of Wetlands in Oceania*. Kuala Lumpur, The International Waterfowl and Wetlands Bureau (IWRB) and Asian Wetland Bureau (AWB).
- Tarburton, M.K. 2021. *Bird Checklists for 672 Melanesian Islands: Island Checklists*. Online at <https://birdsofmelanesia.net/> Accessed: 9 June 2021.
- Van Beirs, M. 2009. *The Solomon Islands 2–26 September 2009 Tour Report*. Online at <http://birdquest-tours.com/pdfs/report/SOLOMONS%20REP%20091.pdf> Accessed: 28 March 2021.
- Van Beirs, M. 2015. *The Solomon Islands 3–29 July 2015 Tour Report*. Online at <https://www.birdquest-tours.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/SOLOMONS-REP-15-ebook.pdf> Accessed: 28 March 2021.
- Van Perlo, B. 2011. *Birds of Hawaii, New Zealand, and the Central and West Pacific*. Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press.

Keywords: cattle egret, Solomon Islands, range extension, Betikama wetland