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THE YELLOW-BILLED EGRET Egretta intermedia in SIERRA LEONE

A cautionary tale of identification

by G. D. Field

Received 24 July 1975

I write this to emphasise the ease with which one can overlook a species one is not expecting and refuse to accept the evidence before one, relying on reference books to the exclusion of common sense, in the hope that others may be enabled to avoid the mistake.

There is little information on the Yellow-billed Egret Egretta intermedia in the West African literature. It occurs only in Vol. 8 of Bannerman (1951), an example from Fort-Lamy with no information except a plumage description, and there is nothing further in his condensed book (1953). Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1970) merely write "Senegal to the eastern Congo" with an irrelevant map taken from their Series I (1952), and record breeding in Senegal and Lake Chad. The first detailed information that I can find for West Africa is supplied by de Naurois (1969), who records it breeding in the Senegal delta and probably in the Bijagos Islands of Guinea Bissau where he found it rare. Elgood, Fry & Dowsett (1973) say "Egretta intermedia has only recently been recognised in Nigeria", mention breeding near Lake Chad, and continue "the only records from southern Nigeria are in the dry season, November, April and May, but no conclusion about migration can yet be drawn for this overlooked species".

Overlooked it certainly has been, and the fault lies at least partially with the standard reference books where the information is not only scant but erroneous. Thus Bannerman wrote (p.22) "feet and toes black, the joints and bare part of the tarsus yellow...in breeding dress plumes...are assumed". De Naurois complicates the leg colour by mentioning (p.150) "la teinte généralement rose vif des tarses" and (p.222) "la teinte grise ou jaune pâle de la peau des cuisses".

I confess that I spent ten years in Sierra Leone without suspecting the presence of this bird, although I had been vaguely puzzled by the apparent size difference in Egretta alba and had concluded that juveniles took a long time to grow a full-sized beak. Then J.B.Smart, with experience in Kenya, suggested that E. intermedia was present in inland swamps. In December 1974 I spent some time studying egrets at an enormous heron concentration at falling flood waters in southern Sierra Leone. There were definitely two sizes of large white egrets but all had pure black legs and I still naively accepted this as the diagnostic recognition mark. In a visit to a large swamp in north-east Sierra Leone in March 1975 I thought there was some yellow on one bird's legs, and in May, while some 'smaller' birds still had all-black legs, others had varying amounts of yellow, the colour first appearing on the inside of the leg so that birds might appear all black and only show pale yellow when a leg was stretched forward. Finally, J.B.S. and I visited the swamp in mid-June and found three

individuals with pure straw yellow tibia down to and including the joint, although one other was almost certainly still wholly black. The difficulty at this time of year, with the grass growing, was to see the legs at all and great patience was needed to get clear views. Easiest views were often at the moment a bird rose, legs dangling, in flight. Once in full flight, the yellow was quite invisible.

Thus, the legs are yellow only during the breeding season, and the correlation between length of plumes and yellowness of legs seemed close. Whether they go on from straw yellow to 'rose vif' as the season progresses I do not know.

As often happens, once one's eyes are opened there is no difficulty in identifying the species. Bannerman said "easily confused with Buff-backed Heron in non-breeding season" and Mackworth-Praed & Grant made the same remark. In fact it is with the Great White Heron *E. alba* that confusion is likely. In flight the two species appear very similar and the size of a single bird on the ground is not always easy to appreciate. However, the bill is much shorter, hardly longer than that of the Cattle Egret *Ardeola ibis* and, if seen together, this bird is so much less bulky that one wonders why one was ever in doubt.

Further misleading information as far as Sierra Leone is concerned is provided by Mackworth-Praed & Grant : "usually gregarious, but only in small flocks" and "feeds mainly in the water". In the swampy area already mentioned birds were either solitary, or a single one was with a group of Cattle Egrets, or there was a mixed flock of herons in which two or three Yellow-billed Egrets occurred, scattered through the flock and not associating together. Furthermore, although water was available, they fed in the open grass or over old or newly-planted rice fields. Only in the drying out of the flood waters, when fish were trapped in thousands, were they seen in the water.

Their status in Sierra Leone as at least a dry season migrant is now established. They do not occur on the coast, as do all the other egrets, but in inland swamps, particularly when partially dry, associating more often than not with Cattle Egrets and even seen with them in a small patch of old rice field close to a village. There must be at least the possibility that they breed with other herons in the unexplored islands at the mouth of the Scarcies river.

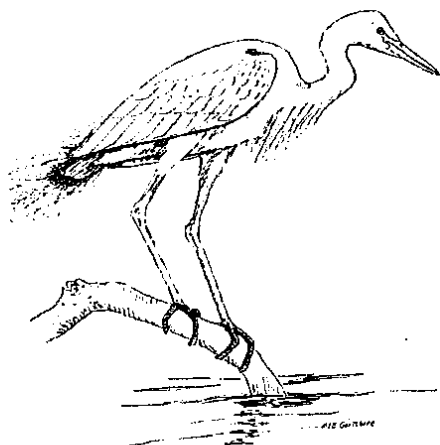
I have no proof, of course, that this is not a newly arrived species, but I think it more likely that it has always been here but has simply never caught the critical eye of an ornithologist. The credit for recognising its presence goes to J.B.Smart, without whose alerting I should probably never have got around to thinking of the possibility of its occurrence.

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EDITORIAL POSTSCRIPT

After production of this issue had commenced I received a copy of 'Comparative Nomenclature of Nigerian Birds for the Amateur' by J.B. Heigham, 26 pp., 1975, published by the author. Mr Heigham has very kindly sent a complimentary copy to all Individual Members of the Society. Most members will already possess or have fairly easy access to 'Mackworth-Praed & Grant' and perhaps 'Bannerman', which has been somewhat displaced by 'M-P & G'; but very few members have

been able to refer to C.M.N. White's nomenclature (1960-1965). Heigham's most valuable booklet lists the scientific and English names used by all three of these authorities.

Mr J.H. Elgood's forthcoming 'Check-List of the Birds of Nigeria', to be published in book form, will doubtless become the standard nomenclature, to which contributors to the Bulletin will be asked to adhere. Mr Heigham's 'Comparative Nomenclature' does not make recommendations where a bird species has been given alternative scientific or English names by preceding authorities, and pending the publication of Elgood's check-list contributors to the Bulletin are asked to follow White's sequence and scientific nomenclature, and Mackworth-Praed & Grant's English names.

Ed.