

Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*



Folk Name: Poor Joe, Cow Crane

Status: Migrant

Abundance: Very Rare to Rare

Habitat: Fields, pastures, roadsides, lawns, wetlands (for breeding)

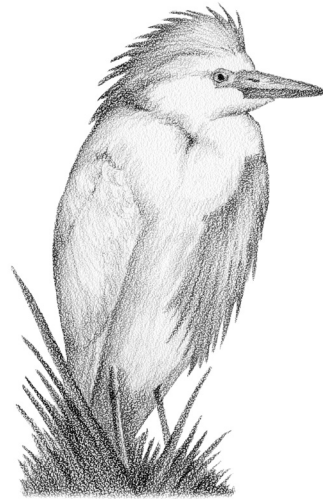
The Cattle Egret is a species originally native to Africa. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it dramatically expanded its breeding range throughout the Southern Hemisphere and then extended northward, reaching the United States in southern Florida in 1941 or 1942. Today, this small egret is renowned as one of only a handful of bird species found on all seven continents. Unlike our other herons, the short-legged, thick-necked Cattle Egret prefers upland fields and pasture habitat for foraging.

In the early 1950s, Cattle Egrets rapidly expanded into both Carolinas. First sightings were reported in South Carolina in 1953 and 1954, nesting was reported in 1956, and the first specimen was collected in 1958. This egret was first seen in North Carolina in 1956, nesting was recorded on Battery Island that year, and a specimen was collected as well. Within a decade, these “cow cranes” and “tractor egrets” (Cattle Egrets that forage beside cattle or follow behind tractors eating insects) were a common sight in several sections along the Carolina coast.

There were fewer than 10 reports of Cattle Egrets in the Central Carolinas in the twentieth century. The earliest report is from York County. Anne Wilcher found Cattle Egrets “in a pasture with a herd of cattle on Creech Farm in northeastern York County on April 11, 1968.” Flo Cobey discovered a pair during the Charlotte Spring Bird Count on May 10, 1968, on the York–Mecklenburg county line. It is quite possible these reports are of the same birds at the same site.

Four Cattle Egrets were found by Doug Pratt and others at Creech’s Pond during the spring count on May 9, 1970. This time they were confirmed on the Mecklenburg County side of the border, providing the first official record for that county. Cattle Egrets were reported from New London in Stanly County on October 16, 1970. The next spring, one was a count week bird for the Stanly Spring Bird Count, seen on April 20, 1971. Two were reported by Scott Juelfs in Gaston County on April 1, 1973.

David Wright observed one bird on April 21, 1989, in Charlotte around the University City Lake, and another at the McAlpine WWTP on May 6, 1989, during the Charlotte Spring Bird Count. Taylor Piephoff found one in Mecklenburg County on April 28, 1990, and reported four birds “near Charlotte” on August 4, 1996. Mike



J F M A M J J A S O N D

Turner tallied a surprising 230 Cattle Egrets in Lancaster County on August 28, 1999.

To date, there have been more than 10 reports of Cattle Egrets in the region in the twenty-first century. One was reported by Simon Thompson in Gaston County on June 18, 2004, and MCPRD staff found one in the prairie restoration site at McDowell Nature Preserve on April 21, 2005. Wayne McBride provided excellent photographs of two Cattle Egrets in a field off River Highway in Iredell County on April 8, 2008. Kevin Metcalf sighted one in northwestern Mecklenburg County at a small farm pond on Beatties Ford Road near Highway 73 on July 15, 2013. Metcalf provided these details: “I could see the



Cattle Egret in Cabarrus County. (Jeff Lemons)

rusty-orange patch on the lower back and on crown. Bill color was yellowish/orangish/coral color. Bird walked away from in the pasture as I got close. Grass too deep to see legs clearly.” Ian Ruppenthal photographed one at the Concord Mills Mall wetland on March 26, 2015, providing an early spring record. Taylor Abbott found one at Pee Dee NWR on August 4, 2015, and Ric Porter reported a pair at the Circle S Ranch in Chester County on October 10, 2016.

Today, the Cattle Egret might be encountered almost anywhere east of the Fall Line in spring, summer, or fall, and a few have been recorded in winter. Nesting colonies have declined in North Carolina but have grown in South Carolina at inland locations. One nesting colony with an estimated 200 active Cattle Egret nests and 600 individuals is located near the town of Dyers Hill, SC. This is just a few miles east of Chesterfield County, where there have recently been multiple reports and just 20 miles south of Anson County. Birders may expect to see more there in the future.