



A Probable Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) on O'ahu

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The Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) is a small white egret that is the ecological equivalent in the Old World of the Snowy Egret (*E. thula*) of the Americas. It has been recorded only a few times in the Western Hemisphere, mostly around the Caribbean (American Ornithologists' Union 1983). Two records from maritime Canada constituted the only ones from North America until a Little Egret, the first for the United States, appeared in Massachusetts in 1989 (Duncan 1990). In the tropical Pacific, Little Egrets are known as rare but regular visitors to western Micronesia (Pratt et al. 1987), but the species has not been previously reported in the Hawaiian Islands. All previous small white egrets that have been certainly identified, other than the introduced Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*), have been Snowies (Scott et al. 1983). Other small white ardeids that could stray to Hawaii include the Intermediate (*E. intermedia*) and Chinese (*E. eulophotes*) egrets, the juvenile Little Blue Heron (*E. caerulea*), and white phase Pacific Reef-Heron (*E. sacra*). This paper presents details of an observation of a probable Little Egret on O'ahu first reported in *American Birds* (Pyle 1990).

In the late afternoon of 1 April 1990, Pratt and a tour group from the Cincinnati Nature Center observed a distinctive small white egret among the numerous Cattle Egrets in the Ki'i Unit of James Campbell National Wildlife Refuge at Kahuku, O'ahu. The egret was first observed with a Swift 15x-60x zoom spotting telescope in the northwest corner of Pond G, the large impoundment in the extreme southwest corner of the refuge adjacent to Amoriant Aquafarm. The bird had gray loreal skin and an all-black bill that appeared longer than that of a nearby Cattle Egret. The bill was knife-shaped, with culmen and gonyes parallel for most of its length, whereas

Cattle Egret bills are more triangular or wedge-shaped. As the unusual egret and the Cattle Egret moved out of tall grass, the odd bird's black legs, as well as its more upright posture and longer neck, became apparent. The two birds then flew up and dropped back into Pond G slightly further away and out of sight. The observers then drove toward the spot, but had only a brief closer look through binoculars before the birds flew again. As it flew away, the black-billed bird's feet showed pale soles. The foot color did not contrast strikingly with that of the legs, but the upper surface was not clearly seen. In flight, the dark-billed egret looked somewhat larger than the Cattle Egret. The odd egret then perched briefly among Cattle Egrets on a dead snag of an ironwood (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) just outside the western boundary of the refuge. The lower legs and feet were obscured by foliage, so only the bill and facial features could be studied through the telescope. When the bird flew, it dropped from sight behind a thicket of koa haole (*Leucaena leucocephala*) that, along with the windblown ironwoods, is apparently an egret roost site. The bird was too distant at all times to be photographed with equipment at hand, but was seen well in the telescope.

All of this bird's field marks suggest that it was a Little Egret. The all-black bill and legs eliminate the possibility that it was an Intermediate Egret or Pacific Reef-Heron, both of which have yellow bills, a juvenile Little Blue Heron which has a dark-tipped pale bill (Pratt et al. 1987) and greenish-yellow legs, or a Chinese Egret with olive-green legs and pale-based lower mandible (King and Dickinson 1975). The gray lores exclude Snowy Egret, which has bright yellow lores at all seasons (Scott et al. 1983, Pratt et al. 1987, McLaren 1989). Pratt had seen the Massachusetts bird of the

previous summer and had seen and photographed Little Egrets in Micronesia (Pratt and Bruner 1981) and Taiwan. Joseph W. Taylor, a widely respected and well-travelled mainland birder who was with the tour group, also was familiar with Little Egrets in the field and concurred with Pratt's tentative identification. After the original bird disappeared, Pratt and Taylor looked closely at several juvenile Cattle Egrets to make sure that they were not mistaking one of them for a Little Egret. A few individuals had black bills, but in most cases the lores also were black and in every case the bill appeared shorter than that of an adult and even more markedly wedge-shaped. All dark-billed Cattle Egrets were the same size as or smaller than yellow-billed birds, and, importantly, had the characteristic hunched posture of that species. That evening, Pratt notified other local birders, including Bruner, of the sighting but provided no particular details other than the tentative identification.

The following day, Bruner and his students from Brigham Young University Hawai'i Campus also saw the Little Egret. This group found the bird again in Pond G, where it rested and preened on a small island with a group of 8-10 Cattle Egrets of various ages. These birds were observed for 20 minutes with a Nikon 20x spotting telescope from a distance of approximately 60m. The egret flock eventually flew off towards the Kahuku Public Golf Course and were resighted in Pond A along the northern edge of the refuge. Bruner and his group particularly noticed the much longer neck and bill and larger size of the Little Egret. At Pond A, Bruner closely compared the Little Egret with a juvenile Cattle Egret while the two stood side by side. Bruner considered the posture and shape of the Little Egret very similar to those of a
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Former Hawaii Audubon Society President and award-winning wildlife photographer Bruce D. Eilerts will lead a spring birding tour from 2 May to 9 May, 1992. This tour is timed to see the southeastern Arizona specialty birds, resident desert birds, and Mexican species. We will visit both the low and high desert for incomparable birding. Tucson is our starting point for an introduction to desert birds, including Roadrunner, Costa's Hummingbird, Cactus Wren, and Gambel's Quail. We will then spend the next three days stopping in Madera Canyon, Patagonia, Huachuca Mountains, and Ramsey Canyon Preserve. The terrain will change from dry scrub and mesquite of the low desert to lush, high desert canyons lined with sycamore.

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The cost of this trip, which is limited to 13 participants, is \$1,290 per person, double occupancy, round-trip from Tucson.

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nonbreeding Snowy Egret, with which he is very familiar. The students, all novice birders, easily and consistently distinguished the Little Egret from the Cattle Egrets. Bruner and his class observed the Little Egret at the second spot for about 15 minutes. Their observations of various details were made independently, before consultation with Pratt.

The same day Peter V. Donaldson (pers. comm.) searched unsuccessfully for the Little Egret and suggested that the bird that we had observed was an unusual Cattle Egret juvenile. However, the bird's size, bill shape, and especially its distinctive posture all argue against that hypothesis. As noted above, a number of black-billed juvenile Cattle Egrets were present but their identity was always obvious from the stubby look of the bill. Cattle Egret bill color is yellow at hatching but is black at fledging (K. Garrett, pers. comm.) and gradually lightens again to yellow (Cramp 1977). Most field guides overlook the black-billed stage; it is illustrated only by Slater et al. (1986).

All identifications of basic-plumaged vagrant white egrets are problematical because seasonal, geographical, and individual variation in soft part colors is not well documented for several species, particularly *E. garzetta* and *E. eulophotes*, and much of the literature is conflicting (McLaren 1989; pers. obs.). Most long-distance avian wanderers belong to migratory populations, but the only migratory population of Little Egret that usually has dark feet is the Australian *E. g. immaculata*, which also has yellow lores (Slater et al. 1986). Furthermore no pattern of vagrancy from the Australian region to Hawai'i exists in herons or any other land or freshwater birds. Whether some individuals of migratory East Asian populations of Little Egret, which seem more likely to stray to Hawai'i, have dark toes is not known (Hancock and Kushlan 1984). Thus, while the bird we observed on Oahu had field marks that preclude its being any other species, it had a combination of characters unlike that of any particular known population of Little Egret. We therefore cannot identify our bird as *Egretta garzetta* with total certainty. If our identification is correct, our sighting constitutes the first record of this species for the Hawaiian Islands and the second for the United States. 

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