

SHORT NOTE

Grey heron (*Ardea cinerea*) sightings in Fiji

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As they were landing at the airport in Nausori, Fiji, on 14 Nov 2005, Pratt and Abbott spotted a large grey-coloured heron beside the runway. The time was around midday and the weather was rainy. Upon disembarking, they used 10x40 binoculars to search for the bird from the departure lounge, and saw it perched in a grassy area among a small group of white-faced herons *Egretta novaehollandiae*. Its much larger size was apparent. Some minutes later, the bird took off and flew parallel to the runway where its markings could be discerned. The bird had a yellow bill, black longitudinal facial stripe, very large size, deep slow wingbeats, and two-toned wings with darker primaries and secondaries that contrasted with paler coverts. These features clearly identify the bird as an adult grey heron *Ardea cinerea*. The contrasting wing pattern is shared with the white-faced heron, a recent colonizer of Fiji (Watling 2001; Dutson & Watling 2007), but distinguishes the grey heron from other large grey ardeids that might occur in Fiji such as great-billed heron *A. sumatrana*, while the white-faced heron has a dark bill and no black facial markings. The observers are familiar with the grey heron where it is common, as well as its American relative, the great blue heron *A. herodias*, which could be eliminated by the lack of brown or chestnut tones in the plumage. The Nausori airport lies on the banks of the Rewa River, only a short distance from coastal mangroves.

Nine days previously, Masibalavu had seen a big heron, essentially grey all over, at 8:50 AM on 5 Nov 2005 at Tavua, Fiji, in a mangrove swamp between Tavua Bridge and the Nadarivatu Road. He was familiar with both white-faced herons and

Pacific reef herons *E. sacra*, and considered the bird much larger than either and a species he had not seen before in Fiji. He noted the heavy, slow motion of the wings in flight, but did not see any plumage details. The locality is ca. 78 km northwest of Suva Airport, and whether this bird was the same one seen later at the Suva Airport cannot be determined, but is a possibility.

The grey heron is found throughout Eurasia and Africa. The northern populations are migratory (Hancock & Kushlan 1984), but it is resident in the Philippines (Kennedy *et al.* 2000) and Sumba, Indonesia (Coates & Bishop 1997). It was unknown on the oceanic islands of the Pacific (Mayr 1945, duPont 1976) until a few turned up during the northern winter in western Micronesia, where it is now a rare annual visitor (Owen 1977; Glass *et al.* 1990; Wiles *et al.* 1993, 2000, 2004; Stinson *et al.* 1997; VanderWerf *et al.* 2006; Pratt & Etpison 2008). The first record for Australia was in 2002 (Palliser 2002). Our sighting constitutes the first record for Fiji and the South Pacific, and may indicate a continued eastward winter range expansion for this species.

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