

A new Cattle Egret breeding colony at Gloucester, NSW

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Cattle Egrets *Ardea ibis* successfully established a new breeding colony during the first half of 2011 at Gloucester in the Hunter Region of NSW. Around 130 active nests appeared to be involved based on the observation of 300 advanced chicks out of the nest. The breeding event, spanning the months January to April, was unusually late for eastern Australia.

INTRODUCTION

On the 4 February 2011 when checking Cattle Egret *Ardea ibis* flocks in the Gloucester area for Project Egret Watch, which is coordinated by Max Maddock, I was surprised to find a large flock nesting opposite the Gloucester Golf Club on Bucketts Way south (32°01'52"S 151°57'10"E), in a small cluster of willow trees overhanging a drainage dam at the back of the industrial estate. This dam is usually half empty, but owing to recent heavy rain was well filled.

This is the first time since I moved to Gloucester in 2002 that I have found Cattle Egret nesting in the area and they appeared to have been at this site for over a month as a few very young chicks were present. They are a common bird locally foraging in the Avon, Gloucester and Barrington River valleys, and have been observed roosting locally with nesting Little Pied Cormorants *Microcarbo melanoleucos* and Australasian Darters *Anhinga novaehollandiae*.

As it was midday with the temperature hitting 35° Celsius I returned early next morning to make a proper count, and continued observations over the next two months. Temperatures in early 2011 were hot, frequently reaching the high 30s midday, with torrential rain and local flooding mid February.

METHODS

Periodic visits were made to the colony to monitor breeding success from the time it was found in February 2011 until August when the birds had dispersed from the breeding site. There was a break in the continuity of observations in the second half of February due to my absence.

Records were also kept of all flocks of Cattle Egret foraging in the Gloucester area to monitor foraging in the vicinity of the breeding colony.

FIELD OBSERVATIONS

5 February 2011, 0545-0635 hours

130+ birds were present, mostly in full breeding plumage. This was a rough count as the egrets were very nervous, flying off at my approach. 35 nests were counted with sitting birds. Three chicks were in view, one well developed and two just showing heads above the nest. Some nests looked old and bedraggled. Adults started flying from the site at 0615 with about 40 flying north and 25 south-east.

9 February 2011, 1400 hours

I returned to attempt a better count. At least 50 active nests with some not occupied. 130-150 adults present. As before the birds were very nervous at my approach.

7 March 2011, 1605 hours

Many nests contained young chicks, with well-developed chicks perched nearby – clutches of 1, 2 or 3 chicks per nest were noted and older ones had formed groups out of nest. One dead chick was hanging by its neck from a branch, however no dead birds were noted floating in water under the willows. All the egrets were very agitated. Five Little Black Cormorants *Phalacrocorax sulcirostris* were perched low in willows.

24 March 2011, 1510-1530 hours

Over 300 chicks were counted out of nest with a few chicks remaining in nests. 20 adults were also present. The birds were very easily disturbed, many exercising vigorously with much wing flapping.

28 March 2011, 0830-0840 hours

Most chicks were perched away from nests, but two nests still contained very small chicks and few adults retained the characteristic orange-headed breeding plumage. Juveniles were exercising with some flying on my arrival to tops of nearby tall gum trees.

8 April 2011, 1045 hours

Many juveniles flying well. Few adults present. One Royal Spoonbill *Platalea flavipes* was roosting amongst the egrets.

17 April 2011, 0730 hours

Eighty-two juvenile birds were present with 2 adults; conditions involved drizzling rain, but no wind.

Subsequently the Avon and Gloucester valleys were searched for foraging birds between 0800 and 1000 hours and 450 Cattle Egrets were located:

- 100+ adults opposite Sale Yards in small dam with willows;
- 132 Avon Valley with dairy cows;
- 45 Showground Road;
- 60 Thunderbolts Way;
- 38 Bucketts Road;
- 15 Faulkland Road;
- 60 Wellards Lane.

19 April 2011, 1250 hours

Seventy-five juveniles remained at the breeding site, but no adults were present.

22 April 2011, 1145-1150 hours

Thirty-three juveniles remained at the breeding site, but again no adults were present. Twelve Australian White Ibis *Threskiornis molucca*, two of which were picking up sticks and inserting them in old egret nests.

29 April 2011, 1440 hours

Six juveniles remained at the breeding site, one with yellow, five with grey bills. In addition one Pacific Black Duck *Anas superciliosa* and a Dusky Moorhen *Gallinula tenebrosa* were present.

11 May 2011, late afternoon

No Cattle Egret at the breeding colony site. 332 were counted during a search of Gloucester/Avon valleys. I later learned that large flocks were foraging in the Barrington River valley.

No Cattle Egrets have been seen at the breeding site during irregular visits from May to August, and numbers in foraging flocks have declined throughout the area.

DISCUSSION

In eastern Australia the Cattle Egret's nesting season typically spans five months, from October to March and most successful nests fledge two or three young (McKilligan 2005). As the incubation period is about 24 days, my observations suggest eggs were laid about the beginning of January with some juveniles remaining at the colony until the end of April. Thus breeding appears unusually late for eastern Australia.

The 300+ chicks observed out of the nest on 24 March suggest around 130 nests were involved, assuming about 2.3 chicks/nest (Max Maddock pers. comm.) This higher estimate of the colony size is considered more reliable than the 50 active nests estimated on 9 February, when care was taken not to disturb the nesting birds, presumably resulting in a low count of the nests.

It is extremely pleasing to report the establishment of a successful new Cattle Egret breeding colony at Gloucester at a time when the breeding colonies in the lower Hunter have been declining (Maddock 2011).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES

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