

Changes in Cattle Egret breeding at Gloucester in response to drought during 2012

Penny Drake-Brockman

20 Manning Street, Gloucester, NSW 2422, Australia penny@pennydb.org

After successful breeding seasons in 2010/11 and 2011/12 on the south-west corner of Gloucester's industrial estate (Drake-Brockman 2011 and 2012) the Cattle Egret *Ardea ibis* colony was forced to relocate. The willows in the small dam used previously were dead and the dam dry after six months of minimal rain. It looked as if the Cattle Egret would give Gloucester a miss this season. However, some good rain in early January 2013 filled a nearby small dam (used as a roosting site in past seasons) that is additionally filled by run-off from the cattle sale yards. By the second week in January egrets had taken up residence. This dam is very small with a tiny central island on which there is one willow, several small wild tobacco trees *Solanum mauritianum* and some *Canna* sp. lilies: not the most propitious spot for several hundred egrets to nest.

By 15 January 2013 there were at least 30 nests with around 80 birds perched or nest building in trees on the island and others roosting in nearby tall eucalypts or foraging in the paddocks. Most egrets were in full breeding plumage, including some all-white birds also nest building. None appeared to be incubating at this stage.

As I was away from Gloucester many times during the next three months regular records were not kept. On 24 January I counted approximately 60 nests with adults incubating and others foraging nearby. The open structure of the tobacco trees made counting easy but the willow's thick foliage with many nests built so close they intertwined made counting inspired guesswork. On 11 February I could see a few small chicks poking their downy heads above the nests and estimated there were over 100 nests.

On return to Gloucester on 12 April, activity had cooled down considerably and only 32 chicks remained on site. On my approach most flew to nearby trees, leaving about six too immature to fly. Before the end of the month the site had been abandoned with the willow tree bedraggled and

tobacco trees collapsed. Hundreds of egrets were foraging in the valleys between Barrington and Gloucester, with lower numbers south to Stroud Road. There is a much larger dam with big willow trees on a central island nearby in the Avon Valley, in which egrets have previously roosted and in which darters and cormorants have bred. It seems odd that they did not choose to breed here this season, as it would have been much more commodious.

This season's event was considerably smaller than the 2012 season when the number of nests was estimated at over 217 with a subsequent increase in number of chicks fledged - in excess of 450. This season commenced late (early January) due to drought conditions during the previous six months, and occupied a much smaller site although it was vacated at much the same time as previously. The first Gloucester breeding event in 2011 held over 70 nests and fledged more than 300 chicks. The number of chicks fledged this season can only be estimated based on a rough count of nests (100) as no observations were taken during the main fledging period; perhaps in excess of 240 fledged if productivity rates were similar to previous seasons.

REFERENCES

- Drake-Brockman, P. (2011). A New Cattle Egret breeding colony at Gloucester, NSW. *The Whistler* 5: 8-9.
- Drake-Brockman, P. (2012). Cattle Egret breeding at Gloucester, NSW sustained at increased level in 2011/2012. *The Whistler* 6: 54-55.