

Cattle Egret – a brief note on the fourth consecutive breeding event at Gloucester, NSW

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Figure 1. Cattle Egret colony on a small dam at Gloucester near the end of the 2013/14 breeding season (photo by Terry Hardwick).

In the 2010/11 season Cattle Egrets *Ardea ibis* established a new breeding colony at Gloucester (Drake-Brockman 2011). Breeding continued at the same site in 2011/12, but this caused the willow trees to die, in addition to the dam drying up, forcing the birds to move to an alternative site nearby (Drake-Brockman 2012 & 2013). This note provides an update on the continued use of the displaced colony site in 2013/14, despite its small size and few trees suitable for nests (**Figure 1**).

An almost total lack of rain from July 2013 and very hot daytime temperatures delayed breeding in 2013/14 although Cattle Egrets continued to use the previous season's site for roosting. Its dam had retained some water, being fed from the sales yard overflow, but the surrounding paddocks were as dry as a bone. However, several heavy rain storms starting from 9th November 2013 stimulated the egrets to commence nest building and a rough count of 75 nests was made on 17th November with a few birds already sitting. Conditions remained

dry through most of December, but by the end of that month there were half-grown chicks grouped away from nests and many newly-hatched chicks attended by parents. Most nests that contained chicks had two or three per nest, giving an approximate estimate of chick numbers at 140.

The site was not checked again until 3rd February 2014 when about ten chicks with punk rocker hair styles remained in their nests, looking skinny and underfed as almost no rain had fallen in the meantime and the paddocks were drying out. However, I did not observe any evidence of chicks dying from lack of food. No adults were incubating or working on new nests. A count of chicks sufficiently mature to leave the site was not possible as adults and chicks scattered on my arrival.

By mid-March on approach to the dam nearly all chicks flew to nearby tall trees or joined others in the paddocks, leaving five that were still too

immature to fly. Of these, three retained black bills and two were showing some yellow in their bills. By the end of March no chicks remained on the site during the day, but it continued to be used for roosting.

By mid-April Cattle Egrets were widely scattered throughout the Gloucester, Avon and Karuah valleys, from Booral to Barrington. Light rain was keeping the paddocks green so this season's chicks have an excellent chance of surviving. Assuming they return with their parents to breed at this natal site in Gloucester next season, a potential expansion of the colony is unlikely. For Cattle Egret it is obligate that nest and roost sites are located over water although much of their foraging takes place away from water. The present site is abnormally small for an egret breeding colony and the vegetation has suffered severely with the trees now dead or highly stressed. To my knowledge there is only one other site in the immediate

area that is suitable; a larger dam with an island containing a group of willow trees approximately 2km east of the present site, but in the Avon River valley. Cattle Egrets forage in this valley and have roosted there in the past. This dam has also retained water during the recent droughts.

REFERENCES

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