

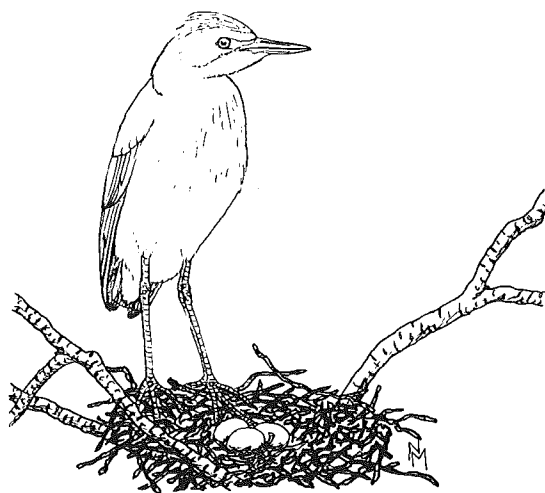
## Cattle Egret

*Bubulcus ibis*

Unknown in North America before the 1940s, the Cattle Egret has colonized a vast New World breeding range in less than half a century. Sight records of the species in South America reach back to the late nineteenth century (Palmer 1962); in Florida, into the 1940s (Rice 1956; Palmer 1962). However, the first South American specimen was not collected until 1937 (Crosby 1972). The first U.S. nest was found on Lake Okechobee in Florida in 1953 (Crosby 1972). Since then, the Cattle Egret has been recorded throughout the continental U.S. In 1975, approximately 155,000 pairs were reported to have nested between Florida and Maine (Ogden 1978).

The first record of the Cattle Egret for Vermont occurred on May 6, 1961 at Ferrisburg (Carleton 1961). The first nesting for Lake Champlain was established in May 1973, when several Cattle Egret nests were located on Island D of the Four Brothers Islands, Essex County, New York (Carleton 1980). On May 13, 1975, Vermont Fish and Game Department personnel found 3 nests on Young Island, Grand Isle County—the first nesting record for Vermont. In 1979 J. D. Stewart counted 22 Cattle Egret nests there. In 1982 the High Peaks Audubon survey reported no Cattle Egrets present on the Four Brothers Islands (Peterson 1982). Thirteen nests were counted on Young Island in June 1983 (S. B. Laughlin, pers. comm.).

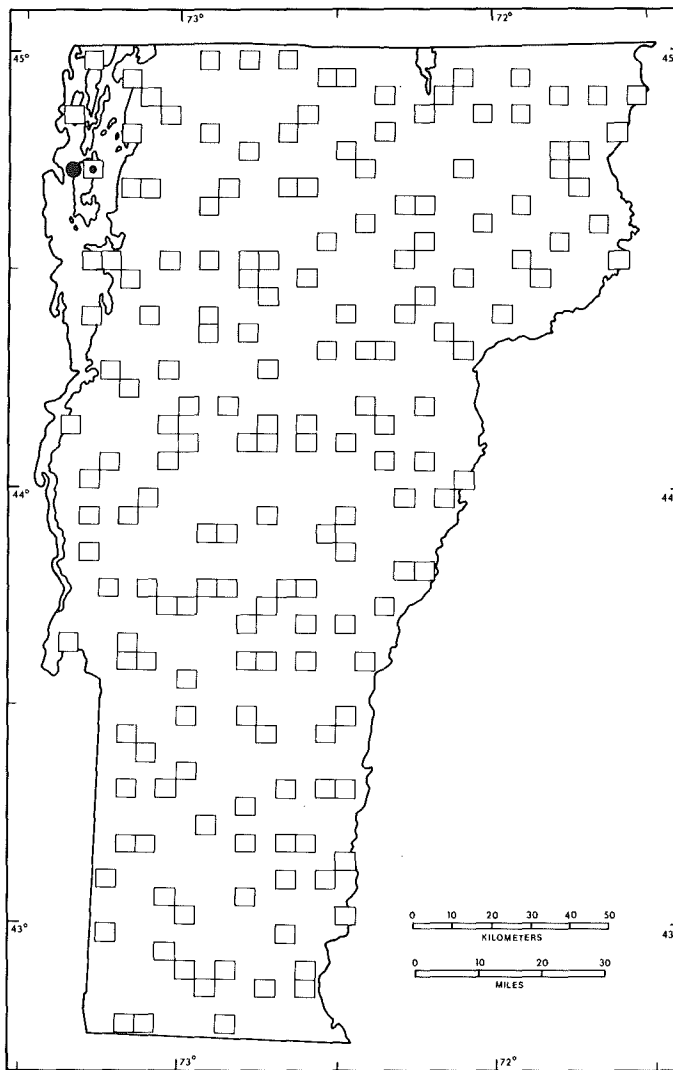
The Cattle Egret forages for insects in damp, short-grass meadows, often in association with large grazing animals (Siegfried 1978). The species nests communally with other heron species in established rookeries (Palmer 1962). On Lake Champlain, the Cattle Egret breeds in Black-crowned Night-Heron colonies. The principal foods of the Cattle Egret are orthopteran insects (grasshoppers) and frogs (Fogarty and Hetrick 1973; Siegfried 1978); during the breeding season the species sometimes feeds its young a high proportion of frogs, implying dependence on wetland habitats at that time (Sieg-



fried 1978). These egrets have been observed following haying equipment to feed on meadow voles, which they toss in the air and swallow whole (A. Pistorius, pers. comm.). The combination of existing Black-crowned Night-Heron rookeries and intensive dairy farming, and the presence of sizeable wetlands make the Champlain Lowlands the only suitable breeding area for Cattle Egrets in Vermont.

Cattle Egrets arrive in the Champlain Lowlands in late April and early May. On Young Island, their sturdy stick and twig nests are built in side branches and trunk forks of poplar at heights of 3–6 m (10–20 ft). Six dates for eggs from Lake Champlain colonies range from May 13 to June 26. The pale bluish eggs number from 2 to 5. Incubation starts with the first egg and lasts an average of 24 days (Blaker 1969; Weber 1975). The young hatch asynchronously, and vary greatly in size. Younger chicks that must compete with their older siblings for food often die in the nest (Weber 1975). The young climb away from the nest after 14 days, and begin to fly well at 5 to 6 weeks (Palmer 1962; Weber 1975).

How the Cattle Egret gained its New World foothold remains a mystery. It seems likely that a wandering flock was displaced by strong trade winds to the north coast of South America from Africa (Crosby 1972). The species' colonization of the rest of the New World has also been the subject of



**No. of priority blocks in which recorded**

TOTAL 1 (0.6%)

Possible breeding: 1 (100% of total)

Probable breeding: 0 (0% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 0 (0% of total)

**Physiographic regions in which recorded**

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	1	3	100
Green Mountains	0	0	0
North Central	0	0	0
Northeast Highlands	0	0	0
East Central	0	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	0
Eastern Foothills	0	0	0

speculation. Rice (1956) suggested that the egrets arrived in northern Florida with other migratory herons. This explanation of dispersal seems plausible, as most early records of the species in the Northeast were of adults in spring, not of wandering autumn juveniles. Vermont birds may have reached the Champlain Lowlands by traveling north with Black-crowned Night-Herons. In Vermont, the Cattle Egret population has grown very slowly, with breeding birds varying in numbers and success in the decade since their arrival.

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