

Field Characters of Young Egrets

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IN a heronry we usually find several species of herons nesting together. In many cases we also find Reed Cormorants in the same colony. As a heronry represents a concentration of sometimes hundreds of birds, it offers an excellent opportunity for ringing large numbers in a relatively short time. The immediate difficulty which arises, however, is to distinguish between the young of different species and especially of the three species of egrets.

During the spring of 1951 a number of junior members of the Cape Bird Club and myself "worked" a heronry near Cape Town, eventually ringing more than 200 young egrets. Of course we started to ring the birds only after we had learned to recognise them. In the hope that others will benefit from our experience, we publish our findings. The following are the most striking features in which the young of the three species of egrets differ from each other:

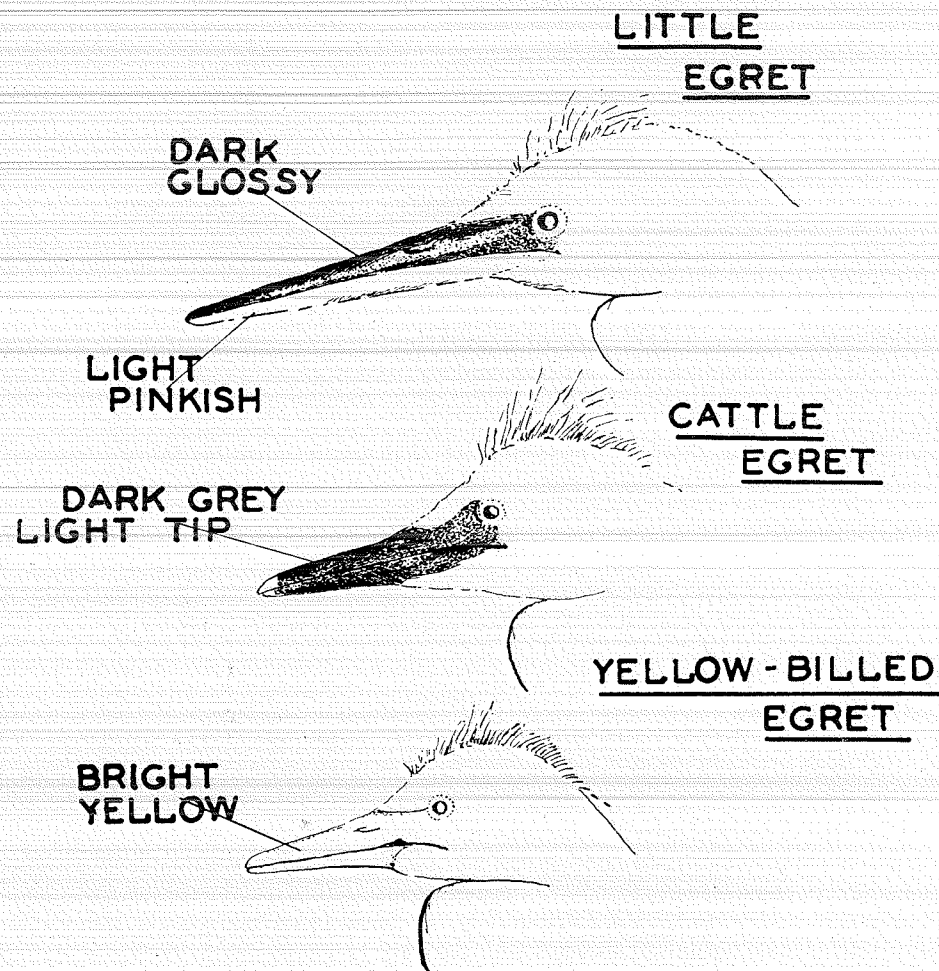


Diagram illustrating the field characters of young egrets.

CATTLE EGRET:

Iris: light biscuit-coloured.

Bill: very dark grey to black, with distinctly light coloured tip.

Legs: greyish-green.

YELLOW-BILLED EGRET:

Iris: biscuit-coloured (same as in Cattle Egret).

Bill: bright yellow, even in small young.

Legs: greyish-green (same as in Cattle Egret).

Skin of wing: bright, light green and not greyish as in the two other species.

LITTLE EGRET:

Iris: grey.

Bill: black on upper mandible, lower mandible with rather a lot of yellowish-white in small young. Medium-sized young have a completely black or very dark grey bill.

Legs: green. In large young feet lighter than rest of legs.

MORE ABOUT WHITE-EYES

Mr. C. J. Skead writes that his article on white-eyes has brought some most interesting and valuable information, notably from Dr. R. M. Harwin of Johannesburg. Dr. Harwin's notes demonstrate again how fascinating and how complex is the problem these small birds present.

Near the Witwatersrand three species occur, namely the Pale Cape White-eye *Zosterops p. pallida*, the Vaal River White-eye *Z. vaalensis* and the Green White-eye *Z. virens*; regarding these Dr. Harwin states "Everyone here agrees that there is no difference in their songs and calls, but it is my impression that they are ecologically and geographically separated. Our subspecies of the Cape White-eye is the most generally distributed, and the common one in Johannesburg gardens; but it is uncommon to the north of the Witwatersrand, where Green White-eyes occur. I have observed one mixed flock in Heidelberg Kloof of Pale Capes and either Vaal River or Green White-eyes. It is possible that our Pale Cape White-eye occurs more frequently in the flocks of Green White-eyes to be found along the Crocodile River.

"Heidelberg Kloof seems to be the nearest locality to Johannesburg where the Vaal River White-eye occurs, and it is a place deserving study. Both *pallida* and *vaalensis* are certainly found there, and *virens* has also been reported, though this may be in error for *vaalensis*. If Greens do not occur at Heidelberg, it may be that the Witwatersrand watershed is the divid-

ing line between the ranges of Vaal River and Green White-eyes."

Mr. Skead adds that he hopes Witwatersrand members will keep a special look-out for white-eyes in future, in order to clear up the confusion. Notes on their habits and calls are badly wanted, especially from people who are also familiar with the subspecies of the Cape White-eye *Z. p. capensis* in the southern and south-western Cape, and *Z. p. atmorii* in the eastern Cape, and who can therefore draw comparisons.

AN INSATIABLE INFANT

Mr. Reed's most interesting article, "A Cuckoo in the Nest", published in *The Bokmakierie* April 1952, reminded me of an incident which occurred a few years ago in the garden of a school in Parktown, Johannesburg. I had heard and seen a Red-chested Cuckoo some weeks previously, and had enjoyed a good view of the bird in a jacaranda tree. There were also Cape Robins nesting in the garden.

One day, hearing a loud, insistent noise, I went to investigate, and discovered a young cuckoo perched on a rose bush. It was shouting for food, and the foster-parents kept flying back and forth with mouthfuls for the insatiable youngster. He was much larger than the Robins, so, to reach his ever-open maw, they perched on the cuckoo's head and fed him from that vantage point.

GWEN EDWARDS.