Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

The Cattle Egret has enjoyed the most explosive natural range expansion of any bird in recorded history. In 25 years it went from being a new arrival to the most abundant bird in southeastern California's Imperial Valley. In San Diego County, however, it has seen a reversal as well as an advance. Since the species first nested in 1979, colonies have formed and vanished in quick succession; from 1997 through 2001 the only important one was that at the Wild Animal Park. After a peak in the 1980s the population has been on the decline; the conversion of pastures and dairies to urban sprawl spells no good for this bird whose lifestyle is linked to livestock.

Photo by Anthony Mercieca

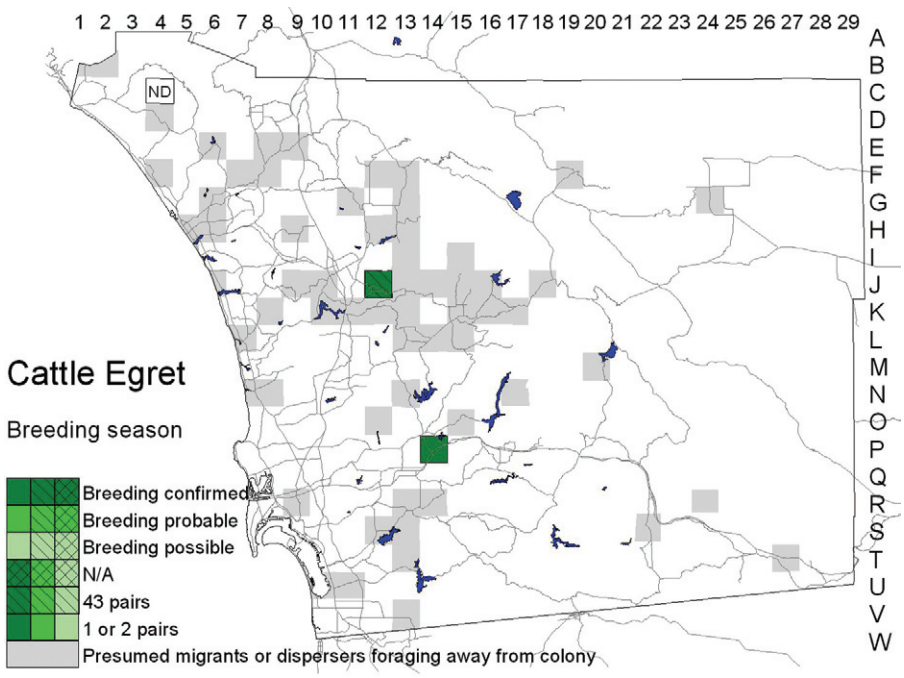
Breeding distribution: The Cattle Egret colony at the Wild Animal Park (J12) is part of the mixed-species heronry in the Heart of Africa exhibit—a site eminently suitable for this species of African origin. Maximum numbers reported here in the breeding season during the atlas period were 100 individuals on 15 June 1998 (D. and D. Bylin) and 43 nests on 9 May 1999 (K. L. Weaver).

In 2001, one or two pairs nested in the multispecies heronry at Lindo Lake, Lakeside (P14). One pair was feeding nestlings on 12 May (C. G. Edwards), but by 9 July no Cattle Egrets were in the colony.

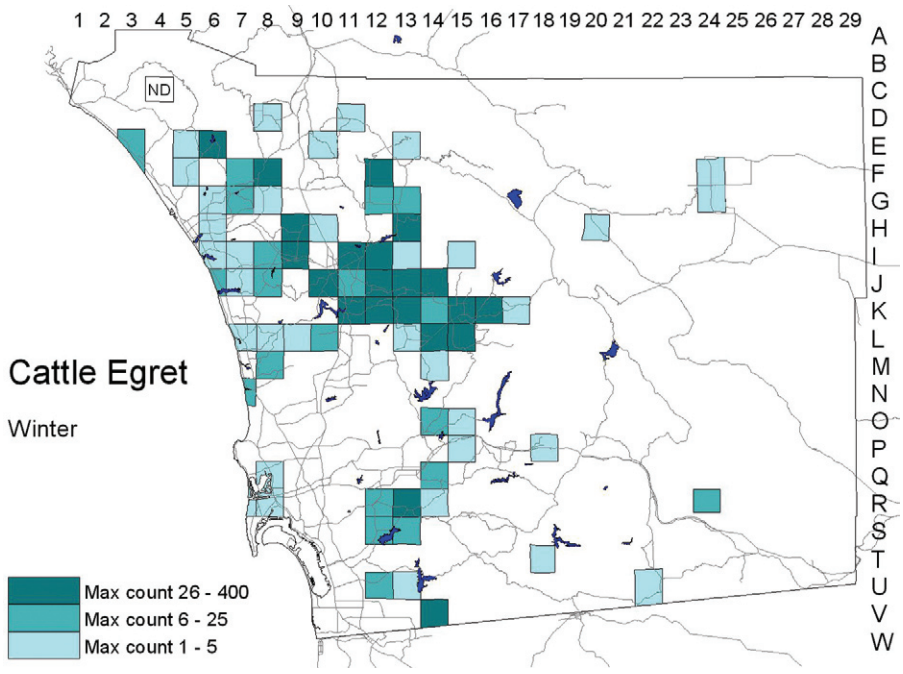
Cattle Egrets from the Wild Animal Park colony evidently forage west to Escondido (J10; over 100 on 14 May 1997, O. Carter) and southeast to the Santa Maria Valley surrounding Ramona (L14; up to 88 on 28 March 1999, F. Sproul; K15, up to 300 on 4 April 1998, P. Unitt). The Ramona region currently offers the most foraging habitat for the Cattle Egret in San Diego County. Cattails in the pond on the north side of Highway 78 just west of Magnolia Avenue (K15) are a frequent Cattle Egret roost.

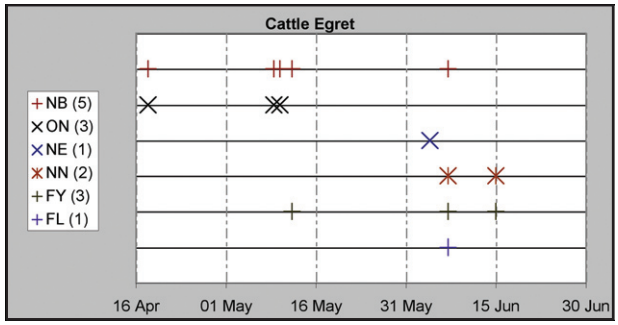
Beyond a 15-mile radius of the Wild Animal Park, the Cattle Egret is uncommon and irregular, especially during the breeding season. It is still rather frequent in the San Luis Rey River valley between Oceanside and Interstate 15 (up to 18 in northeast Oceanside, F7, 26 April 1997, A. Peterson). In southern San Diego County the largest flocks during the breeding season from 1997 to 2001 were of 12 at the upper end of El Capitan Reservoir (N17) 9 July 1999 (D. C. Seals) and 25 on Otay Mesa (V13) 10 May 1998 (P. Unitt). In the eastern half of the county the Cattle Egret is rare at this season; the only sighting of more than two birds was of 10 at Crestwood Ranch (R24) 20 May 2000 (J. S. Larson).

Nesting: The Cattle Egret builds a rough stick nest similar to that of other herons. Within a colony the nests may be packed so closely the incubating birds are within pecking distance of each other. The schedule of Cattle Egret nesting in San Diego County is not well defined and probably variable, at least when new colonies are forming. At the Wild Animal Park the birds have been seen apparently incubating by 18 April and to have young in the nest at least as late as 15 June (D. and D. Bylin). In the enormous heronries of the Imperial Valley, some young are still in nests as late as early September.



Migration: The Cattle Egret follows no well-defined migration in southern California, though it obviously disperses long distances. A bird color-marked at a nesting colony near the Salton Sea was seen near the Otay dump (U12) 15 November 1975 (AB 30:125, 1976).





Winter: In winter the Cattle Egret remains concentrated at the Wild Animal Park (up to 389 on 30 December 2000, K. L. Weaver), elsewhere in the San Pasqual Valley (up to 400 near Fenton Ranch, K13, 3 January 1998, M. Forman), and near Ramona (K15; up to 350 on 31 December 1998, M. and B. McIntosh), Escondido, San Marcos, and Valley Center—places all still within 15 miles of the Wild Animal Park. A secondary area of winter concentration during the atlas period was along the Sweetwater River from Sweetwater Reservoir (S12) to the Singing Hills golf course, especially in the Jamacha area (R13; up to 200 on 2 January 2000, M. and D. Hastings).

Numbers in northwestern San Diego County are somewhat higher in winter than during the breeding season, with up to 40 on lawns near O'Neill Lake (E6) 10 January 2001 (P. A. Ginsburg) and 40 at Bonsall (F8) 27 February 2001 (M. Freda). Cattle Egrets show up occasionally in coastal wetlands in winter, with up to 10 north of Batiquitos Lagoon (J6) 30 December 1997 (M. Baumgartel) and six at Los Peñasquitos Lagoon (N7) 3 January 1998 (K. Estey).

In eastern San Diego County the Cattle Egret is as rare in winter as in the breeding season, and again Crestwood Ranch was the only site of more than three, with 10 on 7 February 2000 (J. S. Larson). In the Borrego Valley we made only three sightings of one or two Cattle Egrets during the atlas period, all seasons combined, but earlier records there ran as high as 18 on 12 December 1990 (A. G. Morley).

Conservation: The first Cattle Egrets found in San Diego County, among the earliest for California, were in the Tijuana River valley 7 March 1964 (McCaskie 1965, SDNHM 35075). The species increased gradually as a nonbreeding visitor until fall 1977, when there was a large influx. Nesting began at Buena Vista Lagoon in 1979 (AB 33:896, 1979), at the Dairy Mart Pond in the Tijuana River valley in 1980 (AB 34:929, 1980), and at Guajome Lake in 1983 (AB 37:1026, 1983). All these colonies proved ephemeral, however. The population peaked in the 1980s, then declined as abruptly as it increased. Totals on San Diego Christmas bird counts, mainly from the Tijuana River valley, increased from an average of 5.3 from 1966 to 1976 to a peak of 3512 in 1985, then decreased to six in 1995. Since then that count has had none. During the five-year atlas period we had not a single Cattle Egret in the Tijuana River valley—where 15 years earlier there were thousands. On the Oceanside count the total peaked at 1087 in 1979, and a decrease was noticeable even from 1997 to 2001. Even on the Escondido count, whose circle encompasses most of the county's current Cattle Egret habitat, the number peaked at 875 in January 1997; during the atlas period a decline was almost continuous.

Why should the Cattle Egret have failed to maintain its abundance in San Diego County, as it has just to the east in the Imperial Valley? The most obvious contributing factor is the relative dearth of foraging habitat—and the decline in this habitat as agriculture gives way to urban development. The explosive increase of the late 1970s was due to immigration, and the sources of these immigrants may have stabilized.

Taxonomy: The nominate subspecies of the Cattle Egret, *B. i. ibis* (Linnaeus, 1758), crossing the Atlantic Ocean from Africa, is the one that colonized the New World, beginning on the Atlantic coast of South America.