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## FIELD IDENTIFICATION OF THE YELLOW-BILLED EGRET

by M. A. Macdonald

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Field (1975) has drawn attention to the difficulty of identifying the Yellow-billed Egret Egretta intermedia in the field, and in particular to the problem of distinguishing the Yellow-billed Egret from the Great White Heron E. alba. During early 1976 I had suspected the presence of small numbers of E. intermedia on lagoons around Cape Coast, Ghana, but had been unable to confirm the identification by comparison with other species until 23 April when two were positively identified in the company of a Little Egret E. garzetta. Since then I have had the opportunity of watching groups of up to 27 Yellow-billed Egrets (together with Little Egrets and Great White Herons) on 11 occasions involving an accumulated total of 119 individuals. These observations allow me to supplement Field's notes on their identification.

I agree with Field that confusion with the Cattle Egret Ardeola ibis (the difficulty stressed in most text-books) by anyone familiar with the commoner species is most unlikely unless only the head is visible. The points of distinction from E. alba are very subjective if comparison is not possible, but are listed below.

E. intermedia is much smaller, with thicker and less 'kinky' neck, but the size can be very difficult to estimate if a single bird is involved and in flight the difference can be quite overlooked even when both species are present. The head of intermedia has a much rounder contour than alba (especially if excited when it raises the short crest on the crown), with a more distinct forehead and lacking the angular crown of the larger bird. However, the appearance of head and neck can vary considerably in both species depending on activity and 'emotion'.

Bill size is diagnostic if it can be determined accurately, but great care must be taken to allow for the effect of parallax in 'shortening' the bill of E. alba. The bill of intermedia is absolutely shorter than that of garzetta while that of alba is absolutely longer. Bill length in both alba and intermedia varies sufficiently, however, often to make the bill of intermedia appear as long relatively as some alba. Perhaps more reliable than length alone is a combination of length and depth at the base, the smaller species having a relatively heavier bill as well as a more distinct (usually) Cattle Egret-like jowl (Fig. 1).

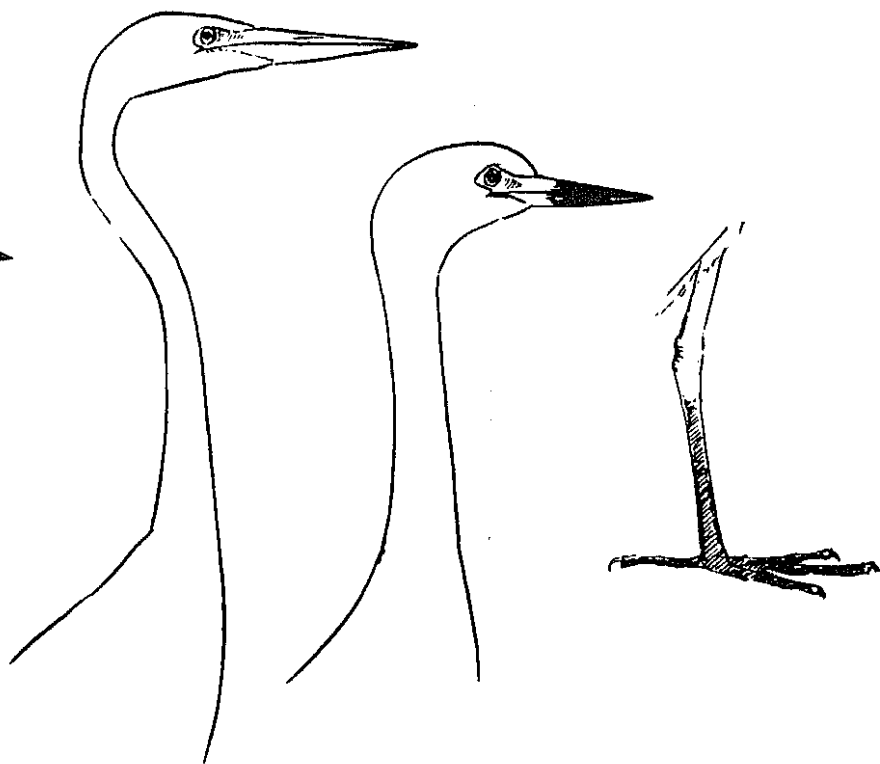


Figure 1 The head and neck of Egretta alba (left) and E. intermedia (centre) to show points of difference. The area of the beak of E. intermedia coloured red in the breeding season is shaded. Right : leg of E. intermedia, showing the extent of black in breeding condition.

Fortunately, in the breeding season (for a time at least) the problem of distinguishing the two species is eased. As breeding time approaches the bills of many E. alba show greater or lesser amounts of black. By contrast, the bill of E. intermedia turns bright red with a yellow tip and base, while the bare skin on the lores and around the eye becomes bright yellow-green. Correspondingly (but perhaps slightly in advance) the tibia and proximal end of the tarsus turn from black to straw-yellow, pink, red and finally a very deep wine-red. Although this latter change was discussed by Field (1975), the change in bill-colour does not appear to have been recorded before. During May 1976 most of the birds seen had some red on the bill, and many showed much more red than yellow. It should be noted that a small amount of yellow on the tibia is not a sure indication of intermedia, as some alba also show this feature (pers. obs.; see also Hollom 1960, Heinzel, Fitter & Parslow 1972).

To summarise, therefore, identification of the Yellow-billed Egret in the field requires care unless comparison is possible with either Great White Heron or Little Egret (when differences in size, build and bill dimensions should be detected) or unless the birds are in or approaching breeding condition (when black on the bill indicates E. alba but red on the bill or considerable amounts of yellow or red on the legs indicates E. intermedia).

The lack of accurate knowledge on the appearance of the Yellow-billed Egret has led to its being overlooked widely in West Africa. The species has been considered very rare in Ghana, but since it was seen commonly in the Cape Coast area and seven individuals were found on a visit to coastal lagoons west of Keta, it probably occurs regularly over a much wider area of Ghana (and West Africa) than at present is realised.

#### References

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