

Cattle egrets

Bird-lovers search for secret

Don Kingery

In a world that has become increasingly hostile to birds, a small, snow-white, dry-land heron that arrived in the United States in the 1950s has grown to an estimated 8 million.

That startling growth, in basically the same environment that has brought extinction to other bird species, has bird-lovers searching for the secret of the cattle egret's explosive growth. They believe if they can find it, they can save other birds from becoming extinct.

Hostile environment

Birds are having to struggle for their existence all over planet Earth.

Of the 9,900 known species of birds in the world, 128 species no longer exist, and 403 species are teetering on the brink of extinction, with no indication yet of whether they're doomed or able to make a comeback.

The spreading population of cattle egrets contrasts with the fate of some other birds in America.

Passenger pigeons once numbered from 1 billion to 4 billion in America, and were so numerous that their flocks, a mile wide and up to 300 miles long, darkened the sky for days as they passed overhead in the 1800s. Men killed them by the tens of thousands with nets and guns to ship to the restaurants where they were served as gourmet food. The slaughter went on every day for years, until the last wild passenger pigeon was shot in Wisconsin in 1899. The last passenger pigeon in captivity, named Martha by attendants, died in a zoo in Cincinnati in 1914.

The last known Carolina parakeet died in 1918. Also extinct are the ivory-billed woodpecker, Bachman's warbler, the heath hen, the dusky seaside sparrow and 123 lesser-known bird species. In 1941, the wild population of whooping cranes consisted of 21 birds. Protective laws and close watch by wildlife agents saved the birds and the flock began to grow. Today, there are a little more than 400 whooping cranes, still protected by law.

The wood stork is endangered and on the edge of extinction. During the past 60 years, their population dropped from about 60,000 to less than 9,000 because of destruction of their wetlands habitat.

Population boom

Meanwhile, the cattle egret has thrived in North America. In the early 1950s, they flew from their native North Africa across the Atlantic Ocean to South America, then north to enter the United States. Some historians say the first cattle egrets in the U.S. came through Texas. The state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, however, says the first cattle egret colony was in Florida, and the second colony in the U.S. was in Lacassine Wildlife Refuge in southwest Louisiana.

Cattle egret colonies build their nests in dead trees surrounded by water. A typical colony is at Sabine Wildlife Refuge, where thousands of cattle egrets built nests in a wide, shallow lake that had been hollowed out by a fire that burned for years eons ago after lightning started it. Rain filled the shallow lake, and thousands of egrets built nests of stick in dead trees in the lake, from where they can easily see any swimming predator approaching.

Egrets leave their colonies at daylight and fly inland in flocks. By some means of communication, they disperse, with one to two egrets following each grazing cow and snatching up insects, especially grasshoppers, stirred up by the grazing cow.

Texas wildlife agents reported in 1954 that they had found 10 pairs of cattle egrets. By 1990, they had multiplied to 300,000 pairs and biologists said that the Louisiana lands could no longer sustain such numbers. They had to migrate to Texas and beyond.

Yet any traveler who happens down Interstate 10 between Orange, Texas, and Jeff Davis Parish in Louisiana will still see on either side and as far as the eye can see, dozens of cattle egrets snacking on insects stirred up by the grazing cattle they dwell beside and have come to depend upon.

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Write Don Kingery, c/o American Press, Box 2893, Lake Charles, LA 70602, or email dkingery@americanpress.com . Timeline VI is available at www.timelinebooks.net .



Special to the American Press

In the early 1950s, cattle egrets flew from their native North Africa across the Atlantic Ocean to South America, then north to enter the United States.



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An egret stands on the back of a cow, which doesn't seem to mind being the bird's footstool.



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Special to the American Press

A cattle egret follows closely behind a grazing cow in a field.