



Little Egret: New for Ontario

Bruce M. Di Labio and Benjamin F. Di Labio

Photo: Brian Morin, 24 June 2015

The discovery of the first Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) in Ontario happened because of a dead woodpecker, a bit of serendipity and a combination of old-style and long distance high-tech birding. On 2 June 2015, while returning home from high school at approximately 14:50, one of us (Ben) noticed a dead bird along the roadside near Carp in Ottawa Regional Municipality. He stopped and identified it as a Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*). Since he was just a stone's throw from the Carp River, he decided to check there as a number of rarities had recently been found locally and the Carp River had good habitat. This was also the location where Ben found Ottawa's first record of White-faced Ibis (*Plegadis chihi*) on 4 July 2011.

As he drove along Donald B. Munro Drive in Carp making his way toward the river, he saw a distant white heron/egret, which he assumed was a Great Egret (*Ardea alba*). When he got to the river, the bird was not visible but after about 15 minutes of scanning, he finally located the bird feeding in some long grass. All that was visible was its upper body, making it difficult to determine the species. Sure enough, the next thing he did was phone his father, Bruce, who was birding in Alberta. Ben quickly gave me the run-down and together, we went over the field marks of herons and egrets.

The bird had features that resembled a first-year Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*), such as the colour of the bill (black) and size of the bird (a small heron). Ben

took a picture of the bird and sent it by text. Unfortunately, the colours of its legs and feet were not visible. Ben continued to provide a play-by-play over the phone. We agreed that this bird could be a Little Blue Heron but without leg and feet colour, we were not certain. Ben continued watching the bird until finally it took a step and Ben noticed it had yellow feet. As Ben relayed this information to me, I asked him if the bird had two plumes sticking off the back of its head. He answered "Yes". Ben could tell, even over the phone, that my heart stopped. I think it took a few moments for me to start breathing again. That's when I said, "BEN, THAT'S A LITTLE EGRET! I'll make a few calls; you take pictures and wait there and watch it." I phoned Mike Tate and texted Bruce Mactavish in Newfoundland. I had not seen many Little Egrets but knew that Bruce had seen a few in Newfoundland over the years and one recently. After reviewing the photos, he felt that this bird was likely a Little Egret.

When Mike Tate arrived, Ben and he studied the egret and agreed on the identification. Within minutes, the local alert went out, followed by a provincial alert. By late afternoon, local birders and photographers began to show up and this continued on into the evening. At 20:00, the Little Egret flew north over Carp and disappeared, likely going to roost somewhere along the Ottawa River for the night.

The following morning, 3 June, Ben was back down along the Carp River at 05:45 and saw the Little Egret feeding along the river at the same location. At around 06:00, it flew west along the river and disappeared. The Carp River is small

and narrow and has many hiding places for an egret to keep out of sight. As birders arrived from southern Ontario, no Little Egret was seen that day or on the next two days. It was not until 7 June that the Little Egret was rediscovered, feeding in storm water management ponds along Eagleson Road near Emerald Meadows Drive. That location is about 20 km south of the original location in Carp. Another local and cross-Ontario alert followed and fortunately, many who arrived in the pouring rain on 8 June were rewarded as it was observed along Palladium Drive near Lockheed-Martin, a 5 km flight north of the Eagleson Road ponds. There were no reports the following morning, 9 June.

Over the next five weeks, the Little Egret played hide and seek with many visiting birders who traveled from all over southern Ontario, New York, New Jersey, Florida, Texas, Michigan and Minnesota (Table 1). Numerous birders made several trips to Ottawa before finally viewing the bird. The egret disappeared for a week or so a couple of times, then showed up for a day or a few hours before vanishing again. Beginning 29 June, it became almost a regular early morning visitor along the Ottawa River at Andrew Haydon Park, flying in from its roosting site on Conroy Island at Deschenes Rapids, Quebec. After a brief stop at the park, it would fly southward to parts unknown. This pattern continued until the last observation in Ontario at Andrew Haydon Park during the early morning of 10 July. Subsequently, it was observed once in Quebec on 13 July (Table 1).

Table 1. Compilation of observations of the Little Egret in Ottawa (Regional Municipality), 1 June to 13 July 2015. List and details compiled by Alan Wormington.

Date	Location	Details
1-3 June	Carp, Ottawa	(many observers; the bird was “found” by Ben F. Di Labio on 2 June) note that this bird was actually first seen by a local resident on 1 June; that person provided a perfect description to Robert Curry, including a description of the head plumes. Thus 1 June is the official “start” date for this record.
7-8 June	Kanata, Ottawa Emerald Meadows Road and Eagleson Road on 7 June; nearby locations on 8 June	(Joe Wilson <i>et al.</i>)
8 June	Britannia, Ottawa and Conroy Island, Quebec	(Jeremy M. Bensette, Emma R. Buck)
11 June	Ottawa, Ottawa Baseline and Clyde	(Marcel Gahbauer) report not certain, just a “small white heron”
17 June	Manotick, Ottawa	(observer unknown; reported <i>vide</i> Robert J. Cermak) seen in a tree on the Rideau River (seen from Rideau River Drive)
20 June	near Manotick, Ottawa	(<i>vide</i> Bruce M. Di Labio)
24 June	Ottawa (Nepean), Ottawa	(<i>vide</i> J. Michael Tate), west end of Andrew Haydon Park (stayed most of day)
24-27 June	Britannia, Ottawa	(Nina Stavlund, Tony F.M. Beck <i>et al.</i>) at the mouth of Pinecrest Creek just east of the Britannia Filtration Plant; flew to Conroy Island, Quebec, late on both 25-26 June.
27 June	Conroy Island, Quebec	apparently flew in from the west at sunset
28-29 June	Britannia, Ottawa	(Glenn Coady/Alan Wormington) on both days seen flying past yacht-club buildings at 5:10 a.m., then onwards to west end of Andrew Haydon Park. Glenn Coady on June 28; Alan Wormington on June 29.
28 June–4 July (daily)	Ottawa (Nepean), Ottawa	(<i>vide</i> Bruce M. Di Labio <i>et al.</i>) west end of Andrew Haydon Park (very early morning only)
7 July	Ottawa (Nepean), Ottawa	(<i>vide</i> Bruce M. Di Labio) west end of Andrew Haydon Park (very early morning only)
10 July	Ottawa (Nepean), Ottawa	(<i>vide</i> Bruce M. Di Labio) west end of Andrew Haydon Park (very early morning only)
10 July	Britannia, Ottawa	(<i>vide</i> Bruce M. Di Labio) flew into Conroy Island, Quebec, (late p.m.), so presumably was also seen at Britannia (in flight)
11 July	not seen at Andrew Haydon Park this morning	(<i>vide</i> Bruce M. Di Labio)
13 July	Conroy Island, Quebec	(<i>vide</i> Gregory Zbitnew) – Quebec only, not Ontario!

More information on dates, locations and observers of the Little Egret is in the Ontario Bird Records Committee report for 2015 (Burrell and Charlton 2016).



Figure 1. Little Egret preening (a) and in profile (b) showing the distinctive head plumes of a breeding adult on 2 June 2015.

Photos: Digiscoped by Benjamin F. Di Labio.

The Little Egret was an adult. The two long head plumes indicated it was in breeding plumage, although the lores were blue-grey rather than the reddish colour of high breeding condition. The head plumes were observed only on 2 and 3 June. They were not noted during observations after 3 June (Figure 3) and that led some to speculate that there were two Little Egrets in the area. However, head plumes are known to only be present during the breeding season (Kushlan and Hancock 2005) and these may have dropped off by early June. While in the Ottawa area, the egret was observed foraging, resting and preening in the company of Great Egrets, Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*), Black-crowned Night-Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) and Green Herons (*Butorides virescens*). It roosted, for a few weeks at least, at Conroy Island, Quebec, in the Ottawa River where Double-crested Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax auritus*), Great Egrets, Great Blue Herons, Black-crowned Night-Herons and Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) nest colonially. Those other species were never seen harassing the Little Egret, at the roost site or elsewhere. The details of this record were submitted to the Ontario Bird Records Committee, which accepted it as the first confirmed record of Little Egret for Ontario (Burrell and Charlton 2016).

The Little Egret is an old world species and a known wanderer. There are more than 35 records for North America, most from the Atlantic states and Canadian maritime provinces between mid-April and mid-September (Howell *et al.* 2014). The first North American record



Figure 3. The Little Egret minus the head plumes on 8 June 2015 as it fed in a pond along Palladium Drive.
Photo: Brian Morin.

was on 8 May 1954 when a female was collected at Flatrock, Conception Bay, Newfoundland (Godfrey 1986). Before this 2015 sighting, the closest record to Ontario was from Montreal, Quebec, along the St. Lawrence River, in July 2012. During the spring/ summer of 2015, there were a few reports of Little Egrets from the northeast including Newfoundland and Nova Scotia (Seeler 2016), New York (Mitra *et al.* 2016) and Maine (Lovitch 2015).

Where could this bird have come from? We will never know for certain, but there are at least two possibilities.

The Ottawa Little Egret could have originated from Europe and crossed over the North Atlantic Ocean. Little Egret populations have been increasing in Western Europe during the past few decades and there are numerous records for Iceland (B. Mactavish, pers.comm.). Records from Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Quebec suggest Europe as a possible source. There have been recoveries of Spanish-banded birds in Trinidad, Suriname, and Martinique (Haverschmidt 1983). Perhaps those individuals took a route across the mid-Atlantic similar to that taken by the first

Cattle Egrets recorded in the New World (Crosby 1972). However, there is also a small breeding population in the Barbados (since the mid-1980s), and the species began breeding in 2008 in Antigua (Kushlan and Prosper 2009). The hypothesis is that Little Egrets may follow other species of herons and egrets that winter on those islands when they migrate north in the spring.

Acknowledgements

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