



Western Reef-Heron  
Field Sketch by Michel Kleinbaum  
July 15, 1983

The doldrums of the birding summer have evaporated! The unusual dark heron, first noted in Quaise Marsh, Nantucket, by Edith and Clinton Andrews on April 26, was finally identified as a Western Reef-Heron from Africa, Egretta gularis, a state and North American record and surely a life bird for most of the birders from near and far for whom Nantucket, already laden with summer visitors, has become the mecca of the season. A contingent from the Bird Observer staff joined the throngs on July 16 to see the bird and do some birder-watching, but even Roger Tory Peterson, the prize luminary there, had to take second place to the star of the day - the visiting heron.

This lively African bird, resembling at first glance a Little Blue Heron, seemed perfectly at home and fed steadily, the long bill stabbing the water repeatedly and successfully in clear view of the delighted audience, only occasionally flying off to disappear for brief intervals on unknown affairs of its own. A very active bird, it quickly dispatched any Snowys who ventured near and performed a fascinating succession of movements - shadowing the water with raised wings to reduce the glare and make prey more visible, executing swirly foot movements (to attract prey?), prancing sideways as if dancing, and searching for food while stepping steadily backwards. The other herons in the marsh looked very sluggish by contrast. The white chin and upper throat and the pale lores were visible to the naked eye over some distance, and the golden feet, visible in flight and during high-stepping movements, made the bird easy to track and to distinguish from other dark herons.

This heron was thought to be a moulting Little Blue until June 11 when Edith Andrews saw its yellow feet for the first time and realized that this was no usual local heron. By a happy chance, Rob Cardillo of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences' VIREO project (Visual Resources in Ornithology) was vacationing on Nantucket and met Edith when he visited the Maria Mitchell Museum, the result being that he photographed the bird on June 28. Not until July 11 however did the photos reach the Philadelphia Academy where they were immediately identified by Robert Ridgley. VIREO then sent Alec Forbes-Watson, eminent authority on African birds, along with Michel Kleinbaum (whose field sketch appears here) to confirm Ridgley's identification in the field. From that day, the birding world began its assault. It is expected that this exciting visitor will remain until the fall migration, and until it leaves, it assuredly will not be able to so much as drop a feather without some happy birder watching. DRA