FIRST UNITED STATES SIGHT RECORD OF LITTLE EGRET
(Egretta garzetta)

by Richard A. Forster

The morning of Saturday, August 12, 1989, held little promise of a successful birding day. It was humid, sixty-two degrees, and a steady rain was falling. The previous day was very similar, and, in fact, the same weather conditions persisted for several days following—tropical moisture and humidity with occasional monsoonlike rains during the day. Local flooding was frequent. Nonetheless, these conditions did not deter me from making a hasty trip to Newburyport and Plum Island. It seemed likely that there would be periods of time when weather conditions would be suitable for viewing birds. An added incentive was that the unsatisfactory weather would curtail recreational use, other than birdwatching, at Parker River National Wildlife Refuge on Plum Island.

My arrival at the refuge at 7:40 A.M. coincided almost exactly with the morning's full high tide. There was light fog and drizzle but fortunately no wind. The first stop, about half a mile after entering the refuge gate, was at the familiar Salt Pans or shorebird pool. My plan was twofold: to make a quick check of the shorebirds for anything unusual with a rough count of selected species and to count the egrets. A dark form in the mists at the far end of the pool resolved itself through the telescope into a Black Swan *(Cygnus atratus)*—a native of Australia and undoubtedly an escape from an aviary.

A count of the Snowy Egrets *(Egretta thula)* produced exactly one hundred birds, and a quick scan revealed no obviously unusual shorebirds. I drove down to the south end of the pool to get a better look at the swan. Then I systematically checked the egrets, looking for an immature Little Blue Heron *(Egretta caerulea)* and trying to verify that the loral region (bare facial area between the bill and eye) of the Snowy Egret is always yellow, or at least yellowish, especially on immatures (birds of the year). While scanning through the assembled egrets, I paused to study a bird that appeared to stand taller than the adjacent Snowys and seemed to lack any yellow between the bill and eye. However, I rationalized that the size discrepancy might be an artifact of the fog and mist or that the egret in question was standing on a submerged bar or clump that made the bird seem taller. I also reasoned that the apparent lack of yellow might be due to the poor viewing conditions.

At this point I decided to proceed down the refuge, stopping at selected spots for early passerine migrants and additional shorebird aggregations. I planned to return to the Salt Pans soon to view the birds while the tide still held them, hoping that the weather conditions would improve. Not surprisingly, there was little to see elsewhere on the refuge, and it was difficult to maintain

optimism searching for warblers in Hellcat Swamp encumbered by rain jacket and pouring rain. After viewing Stage Island Pool, which was unrewarding, I decided to return to the Salt Pans, where birding activity was likely to be the most satisfactory.

When I arrived back at the salt pool at 9:30 A.M., the fog had lifted, the precipitation had stopped, and though the sky was still gray, it was substantially brighter than two hours previously. The first order of business was to relocate the strange egret I had seen earlier. In less than a minute I found the bird again. It was feeding in loose association with four or five Snowy Egrets at a distance of about fifty yards. In direct comparison with Snowys it was obvious that my previous impression of the bird was correct. This individual did stand taller than nearby Snowys, its bill was longer and slightly stouter, the lores were distinctly bluish gray, not yellow, and the legs and bill were black—a combination of characters that in my experience would fit only the Little Egret *(Egretta garzetta).*

Now it was incumbent upon me to get as many observers as possible to see the bird before it departed. Knowing there was a group equipped with CB radios birding at Hellcat Swamp, I promptly headed south hoping that I would run into somebody before traveling all the way to Hellcat. About half a mile south of the Salt Pans, I encountered Herman Weissberg, who returned to the pool with me. We immediately saw the bird, and after viewing salient field marks, Weissberg got on the CB and alerted other birders. By 10:15 A.M. a group of about fifty people had gathered to view the egret.

Now it was possible to obtain more leisurely views of this particular individual. In comparison with Snowy Egrets, the Little Egret stood noticeably taller. This character alone allowed it to be located with only binoculars. Its bill was obviously longer than a Snowy's, perhaps 1.0-1.5 inches longer, and slightly stouter but still retained the daggerlike look of the Snowy Egret's rather than the thicker appearance of the Little Blue Heron's. The loral region was bluish gray (greenish gray to some) without a hint of yellow. One observer said it looked as if the bill extended right up to the eye. The legs were very black and much thicker than the legs of Snowys, being intermediate in width between Snowy and Great Egret *(Egretta alba).* The feet (toes) were dull yellow—grayish yellow to my eye but greenish yellow to at least one other observer —very unlike the bright yellow feet of Snowy Egrets, including the immatures. The bird was an adult as evidenced by plumes on the breast and back (scapulars), which were most obvious when displaced by a gust of wind. The two diagnostic breeding plumes on the head had been molted. However, at a later date the two nubs of these plumes were noted by other observers.

The bird's feeding behavior also seemed different. The Little Egret had an upright stance (neck extended), suggestive of a Little Blue rather than the typical hunched appearance of a Snowy. It seemed less active, i.e., did less

running about, than the Snowys. Nonetheless, while it was under observation, it was actively feeding, stalking deliberately, and frequently engaged in foot-stirring. It was seen to catch three fish, *Fundulus* sp. After half an hour the bird flew and landed on the shore of the pool, affording an excellent view of all the field marks, especially the feet. At this point I left, but apparently the Little Egret remained in the Salt Pans until early afternoon and was seen by numerous observers.

I would like to make one comment here about the color of the loral region, of which I made careful note while viewing the bird. To me, this area was distinctly bluish gray. Another observer stated that the lores were greenish gray. Turning to Hancock and Kushlan, we learn that the lores are "blue-grey," but in Cramp and Simmons we find the lores are "green-grey." This points out that subtle shades of color are interpreted and described subjectively, and their perception and description will vary. Another point that should be made here is that field identification of this species is rather straightforward at close range under satisfactory conditions, but at some distance or under less than optimal lighting conditions, positive identification would be tentative at best.

Is the appearance of a Little Egret in Massachusetts so implausible? To answer this, a review of its breeding range, migrations, and history of vagrancy to the New World is in order. There are several races of Little Egret, but only the nominate race *E. garzetta garzetta* is discussed here. This race breeds in southern Europe, south Asia, northwest Africa, and Cape Verde Islands, East and South Africa (Cramp and Simmons 1977). Although an annual visitor to the British Isles in limited numbers, it has yet to breed there. In the northwest part of the range, it breeds in Spain and Portugal. The bulk of this population makes a migration to the south or southwest, many crossing the Sahara and wintering near the equator in Africa. A disoriented migrant that overshoots the western coast of Africa will likely be caught up in the westerly trade winds and, if it survives, would make a landfall on the northeast coast of South America or the Lesser Antilles, the so-called Windward Islands, where it would probably spend the winter.

Given this hypothetical scenario, let us look at the New World records for Little Egret and related species, dividing the records into two geographic areas —the Caribbean and North America. The first report in the Caribbean was a sight record of a bird at Barbados in April 1954 (Bond 1980). This report was followed by a specimen of a bird banded as a nestling in Spain during July 1956 and taken in Trinidad in January 1957 (Palmer 1962). Another individual banded as a nestling in Spain in June 1962 was recovered in Martinique in October 1962. The species then was apparently undetected, or at least unrecorded, until P. W. Smith (pers. comm.) observed three Little Egrets at Vieux Fort, St. Lucia, on January 31, 1985, in the company of three Snowy Egrets, a Little Blue Heron, and an immature Western Reef-Heron! At the same

location within the next two years, I observed two Little Egrets in the company of three Snowy Egrets on January 17-20, 1986, and at least one Little Egret in the company of several Snowy Egrets on February 11, 1987. The closely related Western Reef-Heron (*E. gularis*, but see taxonomy discussion beyond) of western Africa has exhibited a similar but more recent pattern. The first New World record for Western Reef-Heron was the renowned individual present at Nantucket Island, Massachusetts, from April 26 to September 5, 1983. Thereafter, Smith (1984) observed two in Barbados in February 1984 and two at St. Lucia in January 1985. More recently two birds were seen again in St. Lucia in April 1989 (I. C. T. Nisbet, pers. comm.). With the exception of the Nantucket individual, these reports represent birds that probably made a transoceanic flight and then wintered where they arrived.

A look at the North American records reveals a different pattern. The first record of Little Egret for North America was a bird shot in Newfoundland May 8, 1954 (Palmer 1962). This report was followed by an individual that summered along the Gulf of St. Lawrence in Quebec in 1980, and another was photographed in Newfoundland in May 1983 [*American Birds* 37 (5, September-October): 846]. Amazingly, two, possibly three, Little Egrets were seen in Nova Scotia this spring (1989), spanning the dates April 16 to May 22 (McLaren 1989). The evidence strongly suggests that Little Egrets became disoriented during their southward fall migration, made a transoceanic voyage aided by the trade winds, landed in the West Indies, and spent the winter. All Caribbean birds were noted in the company of Snowy Egrets, which is a scarce wintering species in the Lesser Antilles. It is very possible, even probable, that the wintering Snowys represent individuals from breeding populations in northeastern North America. Supporting evidence for this is that of three recoveries of birds banded as nestlings on Long Island, New York, all were

Little Egret in St. Lucia
January 20, 1986

Photo by Richard A. Forster

New World Records of Little Egret

LOCATION	DATE	NUMBER
Caribbean area		
Barbados	April 16, 1954	1
Trinidad	January 13, 1957	1[a]
Martinique	October 6, 1962	1[b]
St. Lucia	January 31, 1985	3
St. Lucia	January 17-20, 1986	2
St. Lucia	February 11, 1987	1
North America		
Newfoundland	May 8, 1954	1
Quebec	May 14-Sept. 6, 1980	1
Newfoundland	May 29-June 1,1983	1
Nova Scotia	April 16-May 22, 1989	2 or 3
Plum Island, Massachusetts	August 12-Sept. 10, 1989	1
South America		
Surinam	June 1969	1[c]

[a] banded as nestling in Spain July 24, 1956

[b] banded as nestling in Spain June 1962

[c] banded as nestling in Spain June 1968

recovered in the West Indies (Bull 1974, page 76). When these Snowys returned north in spring, the Little Egrets accompanied them and ultimately were discovered as vagrants at seemingly unlikely locations.

No article on herons is complete without a word on their taxonomy. Both Cramp and Simmons (1977) and Hancock and Elliott (1978) treated Little Egret and Western Reef-Heron as two separate species, *E. garzetta and E. gularis*, respectively. Apparently Little Egret occurs rarely in a dark morph that closely resembles Western Reef-Heron. The latter species is represented by both white and dark morphs, the birds in coastal West Africa being predominantly dark. However, Hancock and Kushlan (1984) now consider that Little Egret and Western Reef-Heron are conspecific, based on recent studies of breeding birds in East Africa. Therefore, the polymorphic species becomes Little Egret with four recognized races. The nominate *E. g. garzetta* differs from the white morph of *E. g. gularis* in its black bill (gray brown in *gularis*), black legs (dark olive green in *gularis*), and bill shape (stouter in *gularis*), as well as in the less obvious behavioral traits. If this taxonomy becomes widely accepted, then the

Plum Island individual becomes the second United States record for Little Egret but the first for *Egretta g. garzetta*. Hancock and Kushlan further allow that the taxonomic situation is confusing and poorly differentiated and that additional work is needed to determine the actual relationships between the various forms. To complicate matters even more, Curry-Lindahl (1971) in Cramp and Simmons, page 293, suggests that Snowy Egret and Little Egret may be conspecific.

Some observers have speculated that the Massachusetts Little Egret arrived at Plum Island in the spring, offering, in jest, April 24 as a possible date of arrival—a chiding reference to the author's failure to produce a vagrant to celebrate his birthday. Whatever the precise date of its arrival, the Plum Island Little Egret was first noted on the morning of August 12, 1989, at the Salt Pans and was last reported (before we went to press) on September 10, 1989, at the evening heron roost in the Bill Forward Pool at the impoundment south of the Hellcat dike.

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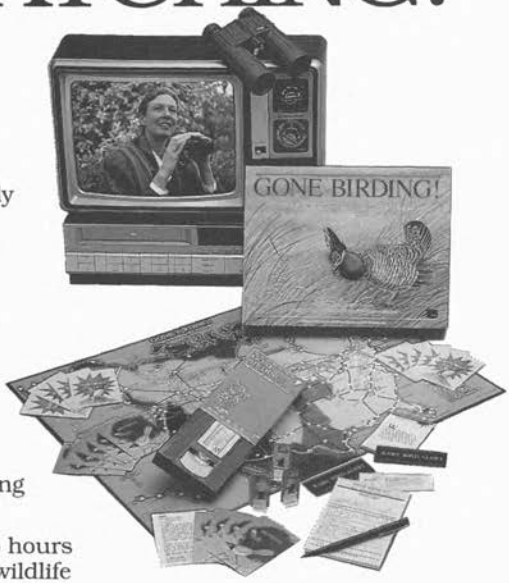

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