

NOTES

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CATTLE EGRET CONSUMPTION OF DEAD BIRDS AND USE OF WINGS TO CLIMB FOR FRESH WATER

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While observing birds drinking from “The Fountain” on Garden Key, Dry Tortugas National Park, Florida, on 5 May 2004, I watched a Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) use its wings to assist in lifting itself into position to reach the sole source of fresh water on the remote island group. This egret was one of 12 present within the walls of Fort Jefferson at the time. The bird seemed weak, although apparently not injured, possibly a result of difficulty finding adequate food on the islands, which are noted for being nearly insect-free.

“The Fountain” is a continuous source of recirculating water about 35 m inside the main gate of Fort Jefferson. An outer retaining wall of brick, approximately 1.8 m square and 40-45 cm high, creates a moat 40 cm wide. A second, inner retaining wall, approximately 75 cm square and 40 cm high, creates a second moat 15 cm wide; this is the Cattle Egrets’ favored source of water. The fountain flows from a brick tower approximately 40 cm square and 23 cm higher than the inner retaining wall; its pool of water is flush with the top of the tower and is the favored drinking and bathing place for warblers, thrushes, and other passerines.

The Cattle Egret that used its wings to climb for water twice approached the outer retaining wall of the fountain, as its companion egrets often did, and tried to leap up the 45-cm barrier with a determined flap of its wings. However, this egret seemed too weak to reach the top, struck the wall mid-chest, and fell backwards to the ground. A few minutes later, it took position at the shortest section of the outer retaining wall, leaped upward and threw its left wing over the barrier, its right wingtip reaching the top of the barrier as well, as if for balance. Using the left wing for leverage, the egret slowly raised its left foot upward and placed it firmly on the top of the wall. Then, appearing to use both its left wing and left foot for lift, raised its right foot atop the barrier. Thus positioned, it was able to step easily across the outer moat to the top of the inner retaining wall, then reach downward into the inner moat for a drink. Young South American Hoatzins (*Opisthocomus hoazin*) are known for such climbing skills, but I know of no previous reference for Cattle Egrets using wings in such a manner.

In addition to this unusual behavior exhibited to obtain fresh water, I saw one Cattle Egret carry off an Eastern Kingbird (*Tyrannus tyrannus*), presumably found dead, and another eating a dead Veery (*Catharus fuscescens*). One Cattle Egret chased a dragonfly (species unknown) and captured it when it landed.