

Intermediate Egret at Midway Atoll

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On 25 June 1997 Jim Nestler awoke in the field camp at Eastern Island, Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge. Before sunrise, he set out on his shearwater survey route, winding through thick stands of Golden Crown-beard (*Verbesina encelioides*) and Ironwood trees (*Casuarina equisetifolia*). Along the way Jim noticed an egret, registered its default identity—Cattle—and returned to surveying shearwaters. Only in full daylight would the egret's true identity become apparent.

Three hours later and a couple of miles to the west, on Midway's Sand Island, James Aliberti and Bart McDermott were working in similar surroundings when they, too, encountered an egret. It wasn't a Cattle Egret. Their tentative identification: Intermediate Egret (*Mesophoyx intermedia*).

I learned about the sightings in late afternoon, after many others had seen the rarity, and went with a small group of volunteer surveyors to find it. After some anxious searching, we spied an egret foraging among patches of leafy *Verbesina*. I studied it from 50 m away, using 8-power Bausch & Lomb Elite binoculars under an unbroken blue sky, and began taking notes:

25 Jun 97 @ 1620. Small to medium-sized, not far from Cattle, probably, with pale yellow bill more slender than Cattle (but not Snowy shape). At close range, all-white plumage (including wing stretch) has peach or pink cast when compared with the nearby Laysan Albatrosses. Legs dark. Characteristic/habitual wiggle of neck side to side near base. Foraging in sunlight at 50 m. Pecking at shrubs, especially, and ground. Feathering on upper leg sleek. Nowhere on plumage is there any plume-like adornment. Loes do not appear to contrast with bill.

After observing the egret, I consulted field guides at the refuge office. I compared *Birds of Australia* (Pizzey and Doyle 1980), *Birds of Japan* (Wild Bird Society of Japan 1982), and *Birds of Hawaii and the Tropical Pacific* (Pratt et al. 1987). The latter two guides mentioned a dark tip to the Intermediate's yellow bill. Few other hints to identification—and no warnings—were issued by these books. North American field guides, of course, did not cover the species.

Refuge manager Rob Shallenberger was eager to obtain documentary photos of the egret, so I led him to the spot. We found James Aliberti already photographing the bird. As two cameras clicked, I resumed note-taking:

Back w/ Rob @ 1710. Head scratch shows black feet, maybe slightly paler than legs. Bill tip dark. Iris yellow bright. As close as 15 m. It is an Intermediate Egret.



Intermediate Egret 25 June 1997 on Sand Island, Midway Atoll. Note the bird's slender build and the gape line which ends below the eye. Photograph/James Aliberti

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An adult Laysan Albatross provides a size reference for an Intermediate Egret at Midway Atoll 25 June 1997. The albatross measures about 80 cm (32 in) from head to tail. A Great Egret, by comparison, would measure 85–102 cm (33–40 in) and would appear as long as or longer than the albatross. Photograph/James Aliberti

I left Midway a few days later without encountering the egret again. It remained, however, for more than a month. In fact, Jim Nestler saw two Intermediate Egrets on 27 and 29 July. The last sighting, of one individual, was on 31 July 1997.

DESCRIPTION

The following notes refer to the first egret encountered, although the second could be described identically.

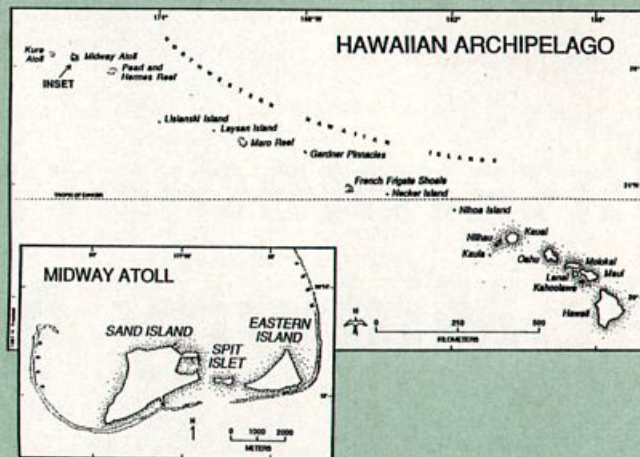
Size and Shape. A graceful heron, structurally similar to Great Egret or Snowy Egret, but nearer in size to the latter.

Plumage. All white. A peach cast was noticed during early observations, but it disappeared in later views. A yellowish wash appeared on the breast when it was illuminated by direct sun and seen at close range—possibly due to reflection of sunlight from the surrounding grass.

Soft Parts. Yellow bill with dark brownish tip. Yellow lores closely resembled bill color. Bright yellow iris. Blackish legs, with slightly paler toes.

Vocalizations. None heard.

Movement/Behavior. Tended to remain in a relatively small area. While foraging, frequently “neck swayed” in the manner described by Kushlan (1978): a rapid side-to-side motion of the neck (and sometimes body) with the head held relatively stationary. “Walking quickly” (Kushlan 1978) perhaps best described as prancing. Fairly rapid and vertical ascent when flushed; wingbeat rate moderate. Jim Nestler described the flight to be “not as choppy and bouncy as a Cattle, but smooth like a Snowy or Great.”



The Hawaiian Islands with a detail of Midway Atoll.

ELIMINATION OF OTHER SPECIES

Ten other heron species are all white, either always or as juveniles or morphs (Hancock and Kushlan 1984). Only one, the Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*), is likely to appear at Midway (Pratt et al. 1987). In basic plumage, it is largely white with a yellow to pale yellow bill, but has dull yellow to greenish black legs. At 48–55 cm, it is smaller than an Intermediate Egret (65–72 cm), and its profile—heavy-billed and short-necked—also differs from the graceful form of the Intermediate.

The Great Egret (*Egretta alba*, sometimes Great White Egret) is most similar to the Intermediate; they are sometimes inseparable in the field (Ali and Ripley 1968, Hancock and Kushlan 1984). Confusion can arise when birds are seen at a distance and without comparative scale. Female Greats of the *modesta* race are said to be the smallest, but at close range any Great Egret (85–102 cm) ought to impress an observer as large. Another feature eliminating *modesta* is its bone-colored tibia. An exaggerated kink in the neck, a character considered noteworthy in the Great by Hancock and Kushlan (1984), was not apparent in the Midway egret. The brownish bill tip proved to be an unimportant clue; juveniles of both species share this feature. Perhaps it is more characteristic of the Intermediate, as the Greats illustrated in Hancock and Kushlan (1984) are shown without it.

The mark that best distinguishes *M. intermedia* from *E. alba*, however, is the gape extension. On *alba*, a dark gape line extends well behind the eye, while on *intermedia* the line ends below the eye (Hancock and Kushlan 1984). This feature was not known at the time of observation and was not noticed in the field. Photos, however, fail to show an extended gape line.

Two other species are always white, but both Snowy Egret (*E. thula*) and Swinhoe's Egret (*E. eulophotes*) have yellow feet and, frequently, black bills. Four other herons have white morphs: Reddish Egret (*E. rufescens*), Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*), Eastern Reef Heron (*E. sacra*), and Little Egret (*E. garzetta*). All four are eliminated by size, bill color, or leg color. A ninth species, Little Blue Heron (*E. caerulea*), is white in its first year, but at that stage has a pale bluish bill. Finally, the Malagasy Pond Heron (*Ardeola idae*), besides being extremely unlikely at Midway, is all white only at its Madagascar breeding colonies.

DISCUSSION

The Intermediate Egret ranges from Africa across southern Asia to Japan, Indonesia, and Australia. Three subspecies are recognized by Hancock and Kushlan (1984), but only the nominate race has dark

tibia. The breeding range of *M. i. intermedia* includes southeast Asia and Japan (Hancock and Kushlan 1984).

Both post-breeding dispersal and annual migrations occur in *M. i. intermedia*. Birds breeding in Japan typically fly south to winter in the Philippines; one banded individual was recovered 3520 km (2200 mi) from its breeding colony (McClure 1974, cited in Hancock and Kushlan 1984). Although this recovery suggests that Intermediate Egrets are capable of long-distance movements, such a migrational path includes large land masses for stopovers. Both the 4400 km (2800 mi) from Japan to Midway and the 6100 km (3800 mi) from the southern Philippines to Midway are mostly open ocean with occasional small islets and atolls. Stopovers on these isolated landforms would have been possible—perhaps necessary—for the egrets to have reached Midway, unless they were aided in their journeys by vessels traversing the Pacific.

Intermediate Egrets usually are found along water margins, but they also frequent grasslands with water nearby (Hancock and Kushlan 1984). The Midway birds were seen on mowed grass with adjacent shrubs and trees (specifically, at the parade grounds, below the water tower, and near the hangar). They were not observed at the two freshwater ponds on Sand Island (the catchment basin and the "dump pond").

Few ardeids have been recorded at Midway Atoll. The first Cattle Egret at Midway was reported by Craig Harrison on 19 October 1978 (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service files). Cattle Egrets have been reported from September through May during several years of the subsequent two decades. Single birds have been the norm, but up to five have been seen (Pyle 1984). None were present during summer 1997. The only other ardeids referenced for Midway have been "bitterns" blown in on winter storm winds (Hadden 1941).

The Intermediate Egret has been reported only once before in North America. The record pertains to a white heron collected in 1879 at Burrard Inlet, British Columbia (Kermode 1923). The specimen associated with this incident, an Intermediate Egret in alternate plumage, was believed by Brooks (1923) to have been an imported skin innocently substituted for the original specimen, which may have represented a resident North American species. Therefore, the Intermediate Egret has remained hypothetical in British Columbia (Campbell et al. 1990) and North America (American Ornithologists' Union 1998).

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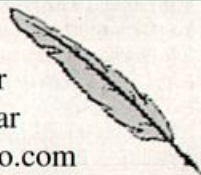
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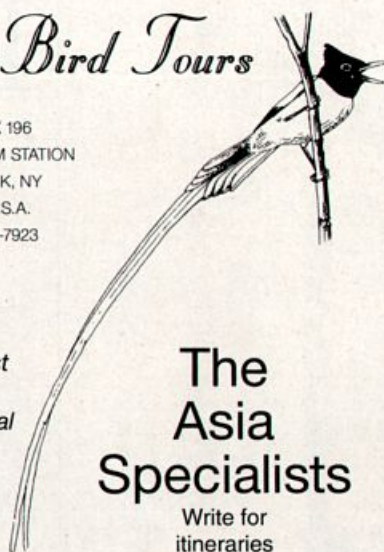
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2001 BIRDING TOURS

THAILAND

6-28 January

NW INDIA

Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bharatpur
4-27 January

Forest Owlet Pretour
31 December-5 January

SRI LANKA

26 January-12 February

PHILIPPINES

2 February-5 March

VIETNAM

North, South
8 March-1 April

2000 BIRDING TOURS

CHINA #1

Beidaihe Migration
Spectacle
4-20 May

CHINA #2

Manchuria, Inner Mongolia
17 May-11 June

MALAYSIA

Malaya, Borneo,
Mt. Kinabalu
24 June-16 July

INDONESIA #1

Greater Sundas
Java, Bali
7-30 July

INDONESIA #2

Sumatra
5-27 August

BHUTAN

6-29 April