

NOTES

THE LITTLE BLUE HERON IN CALIFORNIA

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On 4 July 1976 William T. Everett, Curtis Stuteville and I discovered an adult Little Blue Heron (*Egretta [=Florida] caerulea*) near the mouth of the New River at the south end of the Salton Sea, Imperial County. This bird was perching in an area of drowned trees along the shore of the Sea. The Little Blue Heron was similar in size and shape to the several Snowy Egrets (*E. thula*) available for comparison nearby, but without any bushiness to the head, so the head appeared smaller and the neck narrower. The neck was held tightly against the body when the bird was perching. The entire body posterior to the neck was bluish-gray, darker than the body color of nearby Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*). The head and neck were deep purplish-gray, contrastingly darker than the rest of the body. The bill was distinctly bicolored; medium gray basally, blackish distally. The legs and feet were dark.

This or a similar bird could usually be relocated each time the area was visited until 14 August, when it was last seen. A Little Blue Heron had also been seen at this locality on 3 July by Gilbert S. Grant (Guy McCaskie pers. comm.). On 17 July, when Guy McCaskie, Robert and Elizabeth Copper, and I visited the New River mouth, two or more birds were suspected to be present, although no more than one individual was ever visible at one time. Don V. Tiller reported up to four adult Little Blue Herons present in this area during August (McCaskie pers. comm.).

The Little Blue Heron is a rare bird in California. The first reliable record for the state was an immature discovered at Bodega Bay, Sonoma County, on 7 March 1964 and collected on 15 March 1964 (Jeter and Paxton 1964). The species had been reported several times previously, but the identifications were unsupported or in error. Since 1964 Little Blue Herons have been found with increasing frequency, and may well have nested in the San Francisco Bay area. There are now some 37 state records, with one additional specimen (see Appendix).

Little Blue Herons have been recorded in three general areas of California, with one exception (the record for Inyo County). These three areas are the Salton Sea region, coastal southern California, and the San Francisco Bay area. In each of these areas the species' status is different.

At the Salton Sea the Little Blue Heron appears to be primarily a summer visitor. At least seven individuals have been found at this season, five adults and two "calico" plumaged birds. Palmer (1962) indicated the "calico" plumage represents birds in their second year, but Dickerman and Parkes (1968) found great individual variation in the plumage of immature Little Blue Herons, and considered their plumage sequences still unresolved. There is also one winter record of an adult at the Sea. The identification of the two immatures found near Westmorland on 5 October 1969 (McCaskie 1970) is possibly in error (McCaskie pers. comm.). The presence of adult Little Blue Herons in summer at the Sea in or near active colonies of Snowy Egrets and Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) suggests they may eventually breed there.

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On the coast of southern California, Little Blue Herons occur primarily in the fall, with some remaining through the winter. The majority of these are first-year immatures, in the all-white plumage. For the minimum 14 individuals discovered during the period 27 August through March, all but two are immature. The pattern of northward vagrancy in fall by immatures thus follows the pattern set by the other southern herons, Reddish Egret (*Egretta* [= *Dicbromanassa*] *rufescens*) and Louisiana Heron (*E.* [= *Hydranassa*] *tricolor*) as described by McCaskie (1964). One of the published reports of winter immatures (San Diego, 19 March 1967, Hubbs 1968) is best disregarded. The emphasis this author gives to the green leg color (also shared by immature Snowy Egrets) as an identifying mark for the Little Blue Heron suggests that the records of this species reported by Hubbs (op. cit.) may well pertain to immature Snowy Egrets. That one of the two "Little Blue Herons" reported from Baja California in that paper (Punta Saucedal, 7 January 1967) was seen "stalking over intertidal boulders", a frequent behavior of the Snowy Egret, particularly indicates a misidentification was made.

There are also three records of Little Blue Herons in spring for coastal southern California; all of these are of adult birds. It is also of interest that the spring record for Inyo County was of an adult. Thus northward dispersal of immatures in fall, and of adults and second-year birds in spring and summer, accounts for nearly all of the records of Little Blue Herons in southern California.

In northern California one or two Little Blue Herons are usually found each year but the species' status there is less clear. All but two of the records are of adults, and all but the first state record are within the period 28 April to 25 September. Little Blue Herons have frequently been found in egret colonies, and behavior suggesting nesting was observed in 1965 on West Marin Island, Marin County (Chase and Paxton 1966). The collected fledgling (California Academy of Sciences 68446) proved not to be a Little Blue Heron, since the tips of the primaries were white (Laurence C. Binford pers. comm.). The possibility that it is a hybrid Little Blue Heron x Snowy Egret has not been excluded however. The bird was evidently collected on 4 September 1965 (the date on the specimen label) rather than 19 September as stated by Chase and Paxton (op. cit.). The possibility of local production was suggested for "a bird which was almost certainly a hybrid Little Blue Heron x Snowy Egret" which spent the winter of 1972-1973 at Palo Alto, Santa Clara County (DeSante, Gaines and Remsen 1973). A hybrid between these two species has been recorded at least once before (Sprunt 1954). It is possible that a few Little Blue Herons are persisting in the San Francisco Bay area without replenishment by birds from Mexico.

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APPENDIX

Records of Little Blue Heron in California are listed chronologically by county. AFN refers to *Audubon Field Notes* and AB to *American Birds*.

Imperial:

1. New River mouth, S. end Salton Sea, 22 Jul 1972, 1 ad. AB 26:904, 1972.
2. S. end Salton Sea, 7 Dec 1974-8 Feb 1975, 1 ad. AB 29:741, 1975.
3. New River mouth, S. end Salton Sea, 3 Jul-14 Aug 1976, 1-4 ad.
4. Unit One, Salton Sea Natl. Wildlife Refuge, S. end Salton Sea, 24 Jul-5 Aug 1976, 1 2nd-year. AB 30:1002, 1976.

Riverside:

1. Whitewater River mouth, N. end Salton Sea, 4 Jun-10 Sep 1973, 1 2nd-year. AB 27:917-918, 1973; AB 28:107, 1974.

Inyo:

1. Furnace Cr. Ranch, 8 May 1976, 1 ad. AB 30:889, 1976.

San Diego:

1. San Luis Rey R. mouth, 14-20 Nov 1967, 1 imm. AFN 22:89, 1968.
2. Tijuana R. Valley, 4 Oct 1969, 1 imm. San Bernardino Co. Museum 4419, mounted and on display. AFN 24:98, 1970.
3. Buena Vista Lagoon, 9-13 Sep 1970, 1 imm. AFN 25:107, 1971.
4. Santa Margarita R. mouth, 25 Oct-6 Dec 1971, 1 imm. AB 26:120, 1972.
5. Santa Margarita R. mouth, 12-13 Jun 1972, 1 ad. AB 26:904, 1972.
6. Stewart Mesa, Camp Pendleton, 21 Sep 1973, 1 imm. AB 28:107, 1974.
7. Batiquitos Lagoon, Leucadia, 27 Aug 1976, 1 imm. AB 31:222, 1977.

Orange:

1. Capistrano Beach, 22-23 Oct 1966, 1 imm. AFN 21:77, 1967.
2. Seal Beach, 21 Nov 1970, 1 imm. AFN 25:107, 1971.
3. Upper Newport Bay, 5 Dec 1971, 1 imm. AB 26:654, 1972.
4. Bolsa Chica, 11 Sep 1972-24 Feb 1973, 1 imm.; 2 imm. present late Nov 1972-Jan 1973; 6 Nov 1972-Jan 1973, 1 ad. Immatures seen at nearby Newport Bay 31 Oct and 21 Nov 1972 were probably the same as the Bolsa Chica birds. AB 27:120, 662, 1973.
5. Bolsa Chica, 22 Nov 1973-5 May 1974, 1 ad., probably the same as the one present the previous winter. AB 28:107, 691, 851, 1974.
6. Bolsa Chica, 17 Nov 1974-27 Mar 1975, 1 ad., probably the same as the one present the two preceding winters.

Los Angeles:

1. Harbor Park, 24 Nov 1971, 1 imm. AB 26:120, 1972.

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Santa Barbara:

1. Goleta, 18-20 May 1965, 1 ad. A motion picture film documenting this record has been seen and verified by Guy McCaskie. Condor 68:103, 1966.
2. Goleta, 28 Aug-1 Sep 1974, 1 ad. AB 29:120, 1975.

San Luis Obispo:

1. Morro Bay, 23 May 1976, 1 ad. AB 30:889, 1976.

Santa Clara:

1. Palo Alto Yacht Club, 27 Jul 1967, 1 imm. AFN 21:601, 1967.
2. Palo Alto, 30 Apr-19 May 1971, 1 ad. AB 25:794, 1971.
3. Palo Alto, 3-10 May 1975, 1 ad. AB 29:903, 1975.

San Mateo:

1. Bair Is., 28 Apr-5 Jun 1973, 1 ad. AB 27:814, 913, 1973.
2. Bair Is., 3-21 May 1974, 1 ad. AB 28:846, 1974.

Marin:

1. West Marin Is., 31 Aug-19 Sep 1965, 2 ad. AFN 20:87-88, 1966.
2. San Rafael, 6 Jul-10 Sep 1968, 2 ad. AFN 22:644, 1968; AFN 23:100, 1969.
3. San Rafael, 12 Jul-15 Sep 1969, 1 ad. AFN 23:690, 1969; AFN 24:89, 1970.
4. San Rafael, 5 Jul 1970, 1 ad. AFN 24:712, 1970.
5. Near San Quentin Prison, 29 Aug 1971, 2 ad. AB 26:113, 1972.
6. Bolinas Lagoon, 26 May 1975, 1 ad. AB 29:903, 1975.

Sonoma:

1. Bodega Bay, 7-15 Mar 1964, 1 imm. Condor 66:447, 1964.
2. Tolay Cr. mouth, 25 Sep 1965, 1 ad. Condor 68:103, 1966.

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