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## Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

This familiar denizen of Florida's roadsides, pastures, and prairies is a relatively new addition to American bird life and is probably best known for its spectacular range expansion. Cattle Egrets were unknown in the United States until 1942. In North America, the bird now breeds from New England west to southern Ontario and Minnesota, then south through central Texas into Mexico. It also summers regularly in Arizona, New Mexico, and California.

**Habitat.** The landlubber of the heron family, the Cattle Egret mostly forages in dry or moist upland habitats, often at the feet of cattle or behind mowers or tractors, capturing prey disturbed by the ungulates or machines. It rarely wades to feed as do other heron species. This heron's diet consists mainly of insects, especially grasshoppers, and small vertebrates.

Cattle Egrets usually nest in colonies with other wader species, often outnumbering all others. Platforms of sticks are built in trees and bushes usually on islands or over water. Two to 5 blue-green eggs hatch in 21 to 24 days, and the young fledge in 40 to 45 days. Nesting generally occurs during late spring and summer, somewhat later than the other waders in the same colonies.

**Seasonal Occurrence.** Nesting has been reported throughout most of the state from March through September. Eggs and young have been reported in Dade County in November, indicating that Cattle Egrets may breed year round in south Florida (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). Since the late 1960s, much of the population has left the state during the winter, migrating to the Caribbean and Central America.

**Status.** Emigrating from Africa to South America, then to Florida via the Antilles, the Cattle Egret was first reported in Florida at Clewiston, in Hendry County, in 1941 or 1942 (Crosby 1972). By 1960, it had been reported nearly throughout the state.

Nesting was discovered first at Lake Okeechobee in 1953. The following year, nesting was reported in Alachua County. Since then, the Cattle Egret has been reported breeding north to Nassau County, west in the Panhandle to Escambia County, and south to Dade County. However, the species has not been reported nesting in Monroe County, including the Keys, although nonbreeding birds occur year-round. Breeding colonies are most numerous in the central and southern peninsula and less numerous and scattered in north Florida and the Panhandle. Comparisons of statewide colony surveys from 1976-78 and 1986-89 suggest a dramatic decline in breeding numbers; however, the magnitude of the decline is difficult to estimate due to differing methods in the two surveys (Runde et al. 1991). Causes of the decline could be due to loss of wetlands for breeding habitat, conversion of agricultural pastures to other uses, and the nomadic movements of birds to other breeding locations in the United States.

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