

FIRST RECORD OF THE WESTERN REEF-HERON (*EGRETTA GULARIS*) FOR ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

MICHAEL R. PAICE

8d, Rochdale Way, Deptford, London, SE8 4LY, England; e-mail: mrpaice@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract: An immature dark-morph Western Reef-Heron (*Egretta gularis*), almost certainly of the nominate race *E. g. gularis*, was observed and photographed on Mustique Island, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, on 1 February 2004, representing the 15th record of Western Reef-Heron for the Western Hemisphere and the first for St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Key words: Ardeidae, distributional record, *Egretta gularis*, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Western Reef-Heron

Resumen: PRIMER REGISTRO DE LA GARCETA DIMORFA (*EGRETTA GULARIS*) PARA SAN VICENTE Y LAS GRANADINAS. Un individuo inmaduro del morfo oscuro de *Egretta gularis*, casi seguramente de la raza nominal *E. g. gularis*, fue observada y fotografiada en Isla Mustique, San Vicente y las Granadinas el 1ero de febrero de 2004. Este representa el registro número 15 de la especie para el hemisferio occidental y el primero para estas islas.

Palabras clave: Ardeidae, *Egretta gularis*, Garceta Dimorfa, registro de distribución, San Vicente y las Granadinas

Résumé : PREMIERE OBSERVATION DE L'AIGRETTE DES RECIFS (*EGRETTA GULARIS*) POUR ST. VINCENT ET LES GRENADINES. Une Aigrette des récifs immature de forme sombre (*Egretta gularis*), très certainement de la race nominale *E. g. gularis*, a été observée et photographiée sur l'île Moustique, St. Vincent et les Grenadines, le 1er février 2004. Il s'agit de la 15ème observation pour l'hémisphère occidentale et la première pour Saint Vincent et les Grenadines.

Mots-clés : Aigrette des récifs, Ardeidae, distribution, *Egretta gularis*, St. Vincent et les Grenadines

THE WESTERN REEF-HERON (*Egretta g. gularis*) occurs from the Red Sea to south-east India and in West Africa north to western Europe (Snow and Perrins 1998). The nominate race, *E. g. gularis*, breeds in West Africa, and *E. g. schistacea* breeds in East Africa eastward to India. Although both races regularly occur north to southern Europe (Dubois and Yésou 1995), the nominate race is considered a very rare but increasing vagrant to the West Indies region, where it has been reported from St. Lucia (four records, one of two birds; Keith 1997), Barbados (seven records; Mlodinow *et al.* 2004), Trinidad (one in 1986, the first confirmed record for South America; Murphy and Nanan 1987), and Tobago (one in 2000-2002; Kenefick and Hayes 2006). A summary of Western Reef-Heron records in the Western Hemisphere through 2004 is presented by Mlodinow *et al.* (2004). In this note I document the first record of a Western Reef-Heron for St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

OBSERVATIONS

On 1 February 2004 I observed and photographed (Fig. 1) a dark heron on Mustique Island in the Grenadines from 14:25-14:55 hr and later, while accompanied by R. Touche and O. Touche, from 15:45-16:15 hr. The bird was observed on a rocky

reef off the sandy beach at Lagoon Bay West, midway down the west coast of Mustique Island, at its westernmost point. The bird was feeding using several techniques including the spectacular 'umbrella' wing shading action. The weather was warm with bright sunshine and a light breeze. The bird was observed in good light from about as close as 10 m through 8×40 binoculars and through a tripod-mounted 30× telescope.

The bird was approximately the same size as a Little Blue Heron (*E. caerulea*) that chased it during our observations. However, the bill appeared longer, straighter, and proportionately thinner, the head appeared smaller, and the neck appeared longer and thinner. The plumage was generally dark grey with a brownish tint on the back and downy white (or very pale grey) around the vent from behind the legs to the tail. The chin and throat were white, with the white extending from the base of the lower mandible to beyond the eyes and for about the same distance downward on the throat. The bill was greyish, not black, and lacked a dark tip as in *E. caerulea*. The grey lores blended without contrast with the grey upper head colour. The legs were black with bright lime-green feet, the lime-green colour extending about 2.5 cm up the tarsi. The irides were white.



Fig. 1. Immature dark-morph Western Reef-Heron (*Egretta gularis*) at Mustique Island, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, 1 February 2004. Photos by M. R. Paice.

DISCUSSION

The combination of a white throat and yellowish green feet eliminate the similarly sized and similarly dark Little Blue Heron and Tricolored Heron (*E. tricolor*) of the New World.

The Little Egret occurs in Asia, Africa, and southern Europe, and has been spreading north-west in Europe since ca. 1960 (Mlodinow *et al.* 2004). It was first recorded in the West Indies in 1954 (Bond 1966). An increase in sightings in the 1980s culminated in the discovery by Martin Frost in December 1994 of the first breeding pair in the Western Hemi-

sphere, on Barbados, where a breeding colony became established with as many as 20 breeding pairs and a total population of about 80 individuals (Massiah 1996). Little Egrets also occur regularly on Trinidad and Tobago, with more than 50 records to date (Hayes and White 2001). They have also been found on St Lucia, Puerto Rico, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Aruba (Mlodinow 2004, Mlodinow *et al.* 2004).

The Little Egret is white and is thus unlikely to be confused with a dark morph Western Reef-Heron, yet the existence of dark-morph Little Egrets has often been claimed (e.g., Brown *et al.* 1982, Dubois and Yésou 1995, Snow and Perrins 1998, van den Berg 1999, Borrow and Demey 2001). However, the genetic origin of the dark plumage in such birds is usually unknown and they are very rare (Kushlan and Hancock 2005). Furthermore, interbreeding between Little Egret and *E. g. schistacea* populations has been reported in western India (Parasharya and Naik 1984) and interbreeding between Little Egret and *E. g. gularis* has been observed in eastern Spain (Dies *et al.* 2001). Suspected *E. g. gularis* × *E. garzetta* hybrids in eastern Spain were pale grey with variable amounts of white on the head, wings, and underparts, even in adults (Dies *et al.* 2001). Photographs of birds accepted as hybrids show this plumage range and a bill that is blacker and often thinner than that of *E. g. gularis* (de Juana 2002; see also the websites of the Dies brothers and Ricard Gutiérrez at www.rarebirdspain.net). Parasharya and Naik (1987) considered blue/grey lores and a black bill as evidence of Little Egret gene flow into the *schistacea* population.

Of the two races of *E. gularis*, *schistacea* exhibits more obvious and consistent structural differences from the Little Egret (Dubois and Yésou 1995). In the more westerly populations of *schistacea* (e.g., those in the Sinai and Israel), the white morph predominates, comprising 80% or more of the population (Shirihai 1996, van den Berg 1999), whereas in *gularis* populations in Senegal, the Gambia, and Mauritania, less than 1% are white (Dubois and Yésou 1995). In comparison with Little Egret, Western Reef-Heron has a shorter tarsus in relation to its bill length, the bill is usually thicker, paler and slightly downcurved, and the legs are often paler. Although the bill of the heron at Mustique Island appeared rather slender and pointed and its legs appeared rather black as in a Little Egret or Little Egret × Western Reef-Heron, the lack of black bill colouration combined with the well defined white throat patch and lack of white plumage elsewhere

are more consistent with a dark-morph nominate Western Reef-Heron. The brownish tint on the back and pale belly indicate it was a juvenile.

This sighting provides the 15th record of Western Reef-Heron for the Western Hemisphere and the first for St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The increasing number of sightings of Western Reef-Heron in the Caribbean during the last few decades suggests that this species may well follow the Little Egret in colonising the Caribbean.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Rodney and Ouda Touche for accompanying me to see this bird and for sharing my interest in the birds of the island. I also thank Geoff Hilton and colleagues at the RSPB, and John Archer for commenting on the photographs, and Nick Bertrand, Steven Mlodinow, William Murphy, and my father, E. S. Paice, for commenting on the text. I thank the staff at the British Library in London and at the London Natural History Museum Library, Tring, for being so helpful. I especially thank Basil Charles and Dana Gillespie and their charity, the Mustique Blues Festival, for making my visits to Mustique possible. The Mustique Blues Festival promotes the education of disadvantaged St. Vincent children through the Basil Charles Foundation.

LITERATURE CITED

- BOND, J. 1966. Eleventh supplement to the Checklist of the birds of the West Indies. Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, PA.
- BORROW, N., AND R. DEMEY. 2001. Birds of Western Africa. Christopher Helm, London.
- BROWN, L. H., E. K. URBAN, AND K. NEWMAN. 1982. The birds of Africa. Vol. 1. Academic Press, London.
- DE JUANA, E. 2002. Observaciones de aves raras en España. *Ardeola* 49:141-171.
- DIES, J. I., J. PROSPER, AND B. DIES. 2001. Occasional breeding by Western Reef Egret in eastern Spain. *British Birds* 94:382-386.
- DUBOIS, P. J., AND P. YÉSOU. 1995. Identification of Western Reef Egrets and dark Little Egrets. *British Birds* 88:307-319.
- KEITH, A. R. 1997. The birds of St Lucia West Indies. British Ornithologists' Union Checklist no. 15. London.
- KENEFICK, M., AND F. E. HAYES. 2006. Trans-Atlantic vagrancy of Palearctic birds in Trinidad and Tobago. *Journal of Caribbean Ornithology* 19:in press.
- KUSHLAN, J. A., AND J. A. HANCOCK. 2005. The herons. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- MASSIAH, E. 1996. Identification of Snowy Egret and Little Egret. *Birding World* 9:434-444.
- MLODINOW, S. G. 2004. First records of Little Egret, Green-winged Teal, Swallow-tailed Kite, Tennessee Warbler, and Red-breasted Blackbird from Aruba. *North American Birds* 57:559-561.
- MLODINOW, S. G., W.E. DAVIS, JR., AND J.I. DIES. 2004. Possible anywhere: Little Egret. *Birding* 36:52-62.
- MURPHY, W. L., AND W. NANAN. 1987. First confirmed record of Western Reef-Heron (*Egretta gularis*) for South America. *American Birds* 41:16-27.
- PARASHARYA, B. M., AND R. M. NAIK. 1987. Changes in the soft part coloration of the Indian Reef Heron, *Egretta gularis* (Bosc) related to age and breeding status. *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* 84:1-6.
- SHIRIHAI, H. 1996. The birds of Israel. Princeton University Press, London.
- SNOW, D. W., AND C. M. PERRINS. 1998. The birds of the Western Palearctic. Concise ed. Vol. 1. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- VAN DEN BERG, A. B. 1999. Dark-morph egret in Morocco in April 1997. *Dutch Birding* 21:8-15.