

A REDDISH EGRET (*EGRETTA RUFESCENS*) IN THE WESTERN COAST OF PUERTO RICO

RAFAEL RODRIGUEZ-MOJICA

del Rio # 21 North, Mayagüez, PR 00680; raromo@caribe.net

Abstract.—I observed a white-phase Reddish Egret (*Egretta rufescens*) on 5 December 2001 at Barrio Ovejas, northwestern Puerto Rico. All but one of the five other records have been of red-phase birds.

Key words: *Egretta rufescens*, *Puerto Rico*, *record*, *Reddish Egret*

Resumen.—Observé un individuo de la fase blanca de la Garza Rojiza (*Egretta rufescens*) el 5 de diciembre de 2001 en el barrio Ovejas, en el noroeste de Puerto Rico. Todos los otros registros de esta ave, excepto uno, han sido de la fase rojiza.

Palabras claves: *Egretta rufescens*, *Garza Rojiza*, *Puerto Rico*, *registro*

ON 5 DECEMBER 2001, at 17:00 h, I observed a white-phase Reddish Egret (*Egretta rufescens*) at a freshwater pond in Barrio Ovejas, Añasco, Puerto Rico. The pond is in the watershed of the Río Grande de Añasco, north of the town of Mayagüez. The pond, located approximately 8 km from the coast, has an area of about 0.5 ha and is bordered mainly by overgrown vegetation. Initially I had the impression it was a Great Egret (*E. alba*), but on closer inspection with binoculars the bicolored bill (flesh at the base and dark distally) was evident. The boundary between both colors was very subtle, however, confirming that the bird was in non-breeding plumage. The relatively large size as compared to the white immature of the Little Blue Heron (*E. caerulea*) and the shaggy neck plumes also aided in its identification. The bird was standing at the edge of the pond and was engaged in preening. The characteristic feeding behavior, called “fandango” because of the egret’s dancing and spinning while chasing fish, was not observed. To find a Reddish Egret inland and in a freshwater pond would seem rather unusual, but in Puerto Rico the first records were from freshwater lagoons, such as the inland Laguna Cartagena in the southwest. The explanation for this may lie in the fact that it is not unusual for a predatory bird to forage in alternate habitats whenever food is available. I observed the bird for about 20 min and documented the observations with photographs and video.

The Reddish Egret is considered an accidental or vagrant in Puerto Rico, with wandering birds probably coming from nearby Dominican Republic, where the bird is apparently increasing in numbers (e. Fernandez, pers. comm.). According to Raffaele *et al.* (1998), this egret is rare in the Dominican Republic, but personal communication with local birdwatchers suggests that the status must be reconsidered, be-

cause several individuals are frequently seen in hypersaline marshes, mudflats, and temporary saline lagoons, especially in places like Puerto Alejandro, Barahona; Salinas de Bani, Cabo Rojo; Pedernales; Laguna Salina, Montecristi; Salina, Montecristi; Laguna de Oviedo, Oviedo; and Lago Enriqueillo (E. Fernandez, pers. comm.). Most of the egrets seen in the Dominican Republic are white-phase individuals, but the red phase has also been reported. Breeding has even been observed recently at Laguna de Oviedo (E. Fernandez, pers. comm.).

Reddish Egret is found in southern North America, Central America, Cuba, The Bahamas, Cayman Islands, and Hispaniola. Throughout most of its range the red phase is more abundant than the white phase, with over 90% of the birds being of that phase (Palmer 1978), whereas in the Caribbean both phases are almost equal in frequency (Bond 1993). The disparity of color phases is related to the fact that in southern North America the Reddish Egret, especially the white phase, was heavily hunted for its feathers at the end of the 19th century, nearly exterminating its breeding population.

Few individuals of this species have been reported in Puerto Rico. The first reports included one from Laguna Cartagena in 1943 (Biaggi 1997), two records from Boquerón Wildlife Refuge in 1993–94, and another from Laguna Fraternidad in the Cabo Rojo saltflats in 1998 (L. Miranda, pers. comm.). All of these individuals were red-phase birds, but the most-recent record, from Bahía Sucia, Cabo Rojo (29 December 1999), was white (Oberle 2000). My impression is that some white-phase individuals may be easily overlooked or mistakenly identified as other white egrets, such as the Great Egret (*E. alba*). It is probable that as the population of Reddish Egrets grows in the nearby Dominican Republic,

more wanderings birds of this species will be reported in Puerto Rico, resulting in a change in its status.

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Steve Latta and Chief Field Assistant Donito are collaborating to save wintering habitat for Bicknell's Thrush