

STATUS OF THE LITTLE EGRET (*EGRETTA GARZETTA*) IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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Abstract.—The Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) is an Old World species that has appeared with increasing frequency in the New World since 1954 and began breeding in Barbados in 1994. We summarize data for at least 33 records of the species for Trinidad and 17 for Tobago from 1959 to 2001. It has been recorded during each month of the year on each island, with no marked seasonal variation, though the highest monthly totals are from the first few months of the year. High counts include five for Trinidad and two for Tobago. Breeding is expected but has not been documented.

Resumen.—ESTADO DE LA GARCETA COMÚN (*EGRETTA GARZETTA*) EN TRINIDAD Y TOBAGO. La Garceta Común (*Egretta garzetta*) es una especie del viejo mundo que ha sido avistada con mayor frecuencia en el nuevo mundo desde 1954 y que comenzó a nidificar en Barbados en 1994. Se resumen datos de por lo menos 33 registros en Trinidad y 17 en Tobago de 1959 a 2001. La especie ha sido registrada en todos los meses del año en ambas islas, sin una variación estacional muy notable aunque los registros mensuales más altos son en los primeros meses del año. Los conteos más altos incluyen cinco para Trinidad y dos para Tobago. Se anticipa la nidificación pero no ha sido documentada.

Key words: Ardeidae, *Egretta garzetta*, Little Egret, status, Trinidad and Tobago

THE LITTLE EGRET (*Egretta garzetta*), Western Reef-Heron (*E. gularis*), and Mascarene Reef-Heron (*E. dimorpha*) of the Old World and the Snowy Egret (*E. thula*) of the New World are closely related taxa comprising a superspecies (American Ornithologists' Union 1998). The Little Egret was first recorded in the New World on 16 April 1954, when an alternate-plumaged adult female was collected at Graeme Hall Swamp, Barbados (Bond 1966). In subsequent decades it was recorded with increasing frequency in eastern North America, the eastern Caribbean, and in northeastern South America (see review by Murphy 1992).

The first breeding colony of Little Egrets in the New World was established in December 1994 at Graeme Hall Swamp, Barbados, where they nested with Snowy Egrets (Massiah 1996). The population has rapidly expanded to about 20 pairs (Raffaele *et al.* 1998). Although cross mating between the two species rarely has been observed and individuals suspected to be hybrids have been observed, most individuals mate assortatively and hybridization is thought to be rare (Massiah 1996; Norton 1999; M. Frost and E. Massiah, pers. comm.). Given the potential for this species to rapidly colonize the Americas, its range expansion should be thoroughly documented. In this paper we review the historical status of the Little Egret in Trinidad and Tobago.

METHODS

We compiled and reviewed all reports of the Little Egret within Trinidad and Tobago through August 2001. Details of many recent records have been or are currently under review by the Trinidad and Tobago Rare Bird Committee (TTRBC; Hayes and White 2000; see website at <http://www.wow.net/ttfn>). Because of the TTRBC's decision not to review historical records and the lengthy interval between observation and the TTRBC's acceptance of a record, we include many records not yet accepted by the Committee but judged acceptable by us. Although we have attempted to consider multiple observations of the same bird(s) as a single record, in many cases it was impossible to determine whether a bird was the same individual observed repeatedly. Because the country is frequently visited by birders who do not report their sightings to us, our records are undoubtedly incomplete.

RESULTS

Geographical distribution.—We compiled 33 records of the Little Egret for Trinidad and 17 for Tobago through June 2001 (Table 1). The country's first record was an immature banded as a nestling at Doñana, Hueva Province, Spain, on 24 July 1956, that was recovered at Caroni Swamp, Trinidad, on 13 January 1957 (Downs 1959; American Museum

Table 1. Summary of Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) records for Trinidad and Tobago, 1957–2001.

Location	Date(s)	Number/plumage/age	Documentation ¹	Source(s) ²
TRINIDAD				
Caroni	13 Jan 1957	1	specimen	Downs 1959
Port of Spain	17 Nov to 12 Dec 1989	1	photograph	WM; Murphy 1992
Trincity	02 Jan 1990	2 adults	photograph	FO; Murphy 1992
Trincity	04 to 08 Mar 1990	3 adults	sight	WM; Murphy 1992
Port of Spain	08 Mar 1990	1	sight	WM; Murphy 1992
Trincity	23 Jun 1990	1 adult	sight	JK; Murphy 1992
Trincity	25 Sept 1990	1 adult	sight	WM; Murphy 1992
Trincity	14 Feb 1991	1 alternate adult	sight	WM; Murphy 1992
Port of Spain	17 Feb 1991	1 basic adult	sight	WM; Murphy 1992
Trincity	02 Oct 1991	1 basic adult	sight	WM; Murphy 1992
Caroni	28 Jun 1992	1	sight	GW
Caroni	07 Nov 1992	2	sight	GW
Caroni	30 May 1994	1	sight	GW
Nariva	13 Jan 1997	1 basic	sight*	DF; ffrench & White 1999
Trincity	14 Jan 1997	1 basic	sight*	DF; ffrench & White 1999
Caroni	16 May 1997	1	sight	GW
Trincity	16 to 17 Jun 1997	2 basic	sight*	FH
Nariva	31 Aug 1997	1	sight*	PW; ffrench & White 1999
Port of Spain	04 Sept 1997	1	sight*	PW; ffrench & White 1999
Waterloo	07 Dec 1997	1 basic	sight	FH, GW
Caroni	01 Jan 1998	1 alternate adult	sight	GW
Caroni/Valsayn	20 Apr to 22 May 1998	1 alternate adult	sight	GW; FH
Caroni	11 Jul to 08 Sept 1998	1 basic	sight	FH
Valsayn	02 Nov 1998	1 basic	sight	FH
Trincity	05 to 11 Jan 1999	1	sight	DM; DF
Trincity	31 Mar to 09 Apr 1999	3 basic, 2 alt. adults	photograph	FH; HL
Fullerton	21 Aug to 12 Sept 1999	1 basic	sight	FH; GW, RN
Caroni	25 Feb 2000	1 alternate adult	sight	GW
Trincity	24 Apr 2000	2 basic, 1 alt. adult	sight	FH
Caroni	24 May to 03 Sept 2000	3 basic	sight	MK; FH
Trincity/Orange Grove	07 Sept 2000 to 30 May 2001	2 basic, 2 alt. adult	photograph	FH, MK
San Fernando	10 Nov to 12 Dec 2000	1 basic	photograph	FH; MK
Caroni	10 Jun to 02 Jul 2001	1 alternate adult	photograph	FH; MK
TOBAGO				
Buccoo	04 Jan to 22 Jun 1990	1 dark-phased immature	photograph	Murphy 1992
Buccoo	14 Aug to 28 Sept 1990	1 basic adult	photograph*	GW; WM; Murphy 1992; ffrench & White 1999
Buccoo	04 Oct 1991	1 basic adult	sight	Murphy 1992
Bon Accord	23 Dec 1993	1 basic	sight*	FH; Hayes 1996
Speyside	07 Nov 1994	1 basic	sight*	FH; Hayes 1996
Buccoo	20 Jan to 26 Mar 1995	2 basic	sight*	DF; FH; ffrench & Hayes 1998, Hayes 1998
Buccoo	18 Jan to 20 Mar 1997	2 basic	sight*	DF; FH; ffrench & White 1999
Kendal/Argyle	09 Feb to 30 Mar 1998	2 basic	sight	DF; FH
Lowlands/Buccoo	21 Jun to 08 Sept 1998	1 basic	sight	FH
Buccoo	23 Nov 1998	2	sight	GW
Kendal/Argyle	12 to 29 Jan 1999	1	sight	DF
Buccoo	16 to 17 Jan 1999	1	sight	DF
Buccoo	02 Apr to 02 Jul 1999	1 basic, 1 alt. adult	sight	RN; CS; FH
Buccoo	28 Jun 2000	1 alternate adult	sight	FH
Speyside	16 Oct 2000	1 basic	sight	FH, MK
Buccoo	16 Oct 2000 to 23 Jan 2001	1 basic	sight	FH, MK
Buccoo/Lowlands	24 May to 18 Aug 2001	1 alternate adult	photograph	FH; RN

¹Asterisk indicates accepted by Trinidad and Tobago Rare Bird Committee (Hayes and White 2000).²Initials of authors and other observers listed in Acknowledgments.

Table 2. Monthly distribution of the Little Egret in Trinidad and Tobago, 1957–2001, by year, based on observations. Birds thought to represent the same individuals from one extreme date to another are not included for intervening months when not observed.

Year	Month											
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Trinidad												
1957	1											
1989											1	1
1990	2		4			1			1			
1991		2*								1		
1992						1					2	
1994					1							
1997	2				1	2		1	1			1
1998				1*	1*		1		1		1	
1999	1		1	5*				1	1			
2000		1*		3*	1					2	2	3*
2001	1*	3*	4*		1*	1*	1*					
Tobago												
1990	1					1		1	1			
1991										1		
1993												1
1994											1	
1995	1		2									
1997	2	2	2									
1998		2	1			1			1		2	
1999	2			2			2*					
2000						1*				2		1
2001	1				1*			1*				
Totals												
Trinidad	7	6	9	9	5	5	2	5	7	3	6	5
Tobago	7	4	5	2	1	3	2	2	2	3	3	2
Combined	14	10	14	11	6	8	4	7	9	6	9	7

*Alternate-plumaged adult(s) observed.

of Natural History specimen 325358). With the exception of this specimen and a few records documented by photographs, most reports are sight records. It remains uncertain whether the same individuals have been recorded repeatedly or whether the same individuals travel from one wetland to another. In Trinidad, most records are from the west-central Caroni Plain (Caroni to Trincity) and along the western coast (Port of Spain to Fullerton), with few records from the eastern coast (Nariva). In Tobago, most records are from the southwest (Buccoo, Bon Accord, Lowlands), with a few from the southeastern (Kendal, Argyle) and northeastern (Speyside) coasts.

Abundance and seasonal distribution.—Little Egrets have been recorded during each month of the year on each island, with no marked seasonal variation, though the highest monthly totals are from the first few months of the year (Table 2). In Trinidad, up to five birds have been recorded from Trincity in April (H. Lehto, pers. comm.; Table 1). The highest count from Tobago is two birds (several occasions

since 1995; Table 1). In Trinidad, the ratio of Snowy:Little Egrets is several hundred to one. Little Egrets have actually outnumbered Snowy Egrets in Tobago within the last decade; from 1993–2001, Hayes recorded 7 observations of Snowy Egrets and 17 of Little Egrets (some repeatedly).

Habitat use.—In Trinidad, habitats used by Little Egrets included sewage ponds (Trincity and Port of Spain), rice fields (Caroni, Valsayn, and Nariva), mangrove lagoons (Fullerton), coastal mudflats (Waterloo), fishing boats (San Fernando), and a pier (San Fernando). In Tobago, habitats included a freshwater pond (Lowlands), mangrove lagoons (Buccoo), small tidal marshes (Buccoo, Kendal, Argyle, and Speyside), and a sandy beach (Buccoo).

Age, plumage and soft parts.—Most Little Egret records are of immatures or basic-plumaged adults, which observers had difficulty distinguishing. The few records of alternate-plumaged adults range from December to August (Table 1). All have been white morph birds, except for an apparent immature dark morph bird with scattered dark feathers at Tobago in

1990 (Murphy 1992). Lores coloration has been remarkably variable; although most birds possessed bluish-gray lores, several had pale grayish-white lores, a few immatures or basic-plumaged adults had a slight tinge of yellow, an alternate-plumaged adult had a brick-red lores (at Trinicity, Trinidad, 14 December 2000; Hayes, pers. obs.), and a basic-plumaged bird had a rufous-brown lores (at Trinicity, Trinidad, 5 April 1999; Hayes, pers. obs.). A few individuals have appeared intermediate between Snowy and Little Egrets; these are not listed in Table 1 and their identity remains unresolved.

DISCUSSION

The Little Egret appears to be gradually increasing in abundance within Trinidad and Tobago, though numbers remain small. The fewer summer records from Trinidad and Tobago may indicate dispersal northward (Murphy 1992), though more data are needed to reveal a clearer pattern. In Barbados, breeding occurs throughout the year, even by basic-plumaged adults (Massiah 1996).

The few records of alternate-plumaged adults suggest that breeding may occur, but the nesting colonies of egrets within Trinidad and Tobago have not been thoroughly examined for several decades. Given its recent colonization followed by explosive population growth in neighboring Barbados, the persistently small numbers in Trinidad and Tobago suggest that a breeding population has not been established yet, but may be expected soon. Thorough searches of egret breeding colonies are urgently needed.

Until 1994, all Little Egrets presumably arrived via a cross-Atlantic voyage at tropical latitudes (Murphy 1992). More recent records, however, may represent dispersal of birds fledged from the recently established breeding colony in Barbados. In 2000, the color-banding of nestling Little Egrets in Barbados was initiated with the objective of documenting dispersal and survivorship (M. Frost and E. Massiah, pers. com.). All Little Egrets in Trinidad and Tobago should be scrutinized for the presence of leg bands.

To document more accurately the range and population expansion of Little Egrets within the region, we encourage visiting and resident birders to report all sightings to the Southeastern Caribbean Bird Alert and to the Trinidad and Tobago Rare Bird Committee (see <http://www.wow.net/ttfn>). Care should be exercised in distinguishing Little Egret from Snowy Egret and Western Reef-Heron, and

identification should be based on several criteria rather than just one.

Although Little Egrets usually have dark grayish-blue or pale grayish-white lores contrasting with the bright yellow lores of Snowy Egrets, Little Egrets may acquire bright yellow lores during the breeding season and immature Snowy Egrets may have grayish lores. The feet are usually brighter yellow in Snowy Egret and greener in Little Egret, but some overlap occurs. Structural differences, including the larger body size, flatter forehead, longer and heavier bill, and thicker legs of the Little Egret should be noted, as well as the presence of long, lanceolate head plumes in alternate-plumaged adult Little Egrets contrasting with shorter, filamentous head plumes of alternate-plumaged Snowy Egrets.

The Western Reef-Heron has been recorded once from Trinidad (Nariva Swamp, 22 January 1986, photographed; Murphy and Nanan 1987) and once from Tobago (Buccoo and Bon Accord, 16 December 2000 to 25 July 2001, photographed; M. Kenefick, Hayes, and White, pers. obs.). White morph birds, which are rare and have not been documented yet from the New World, closely resemble Little Egret but usually have a few dark feathers, possess a notably paler, thicker, blunt-tipped and more downward-curved bill, and have paler legs. For further information on field identification of Little Egrets, see Murphy (1992) and Massiah (1996).

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