

WESTERN REEF-HERON (*Egretta gularis gularis*) AT CALVERT VAUX PARK, BROOKLYN

Alex Wilson

421 74th St, Brooklyn, NY 11209

alex@digitalmediatree.com

On 8 Jul 2007, while doing some local Brooklyn birding, I encountered an unfamiliar wader that proved to be New York State's first Western Reef-Heron. During its subsequent stay the bird, and also its location, inspired wide-ranging discussions, from knotty questions about taxonomy and vagrancy, to issues of local ecology and conservation.

Early July is one of the slower birding periods around New York City, with local nesters being the main attraction. Spring migration is over, and fall's has yet to gather momentum; it is a good time for some relaxed birding close to home. Or so I thought on that fair summer morning, heading to Calvert Vaux Park at the mouth of Coney Island Creek, a sketchy little plot of landfill I'd only recently begun to explore, having moved to the nearby Bay Ridge neighborhood a couple of years prior.

The heron was noted around 10:00 am in a shallow triangular bay that daily forms a tidal flat. I'd scanned the flat earlier in the morning when the tide was low, using a 10X binocular, and although I'd seen at least five heron species, none was unusual. Now, however, the tide was coming in and trailing its leading edge was a slate colored bird I hadn't seen before. At a glance it appeared to be about the right size and overall color for a Little Blue Heron, but when I got it in the glass, maybe 200 feet away, I saw that it had a pure white chin and upper throat, and when it raised a foot out of the water it was bright yellow.

This suite of characteristics didn't agree with any local heron plumage I was familiar with. It brought to mind a cross between Little Blue Heron and Snowy Egret. In fact the bird was foraging in close proximity to a Snowy, which it matched closely in size, structure and behavior. Color aside, the main difference was in the display plumes, less prominent and less frilly on the dark bird, and on its head coalescing into a single long, whip-like plume. The bill appeared longer and heavier than the Snowy's, though this was exaggerated by the way it's blackish color extended onto the facial skin through the lores, bordered by the white of the chin and traces of white around the eye and across the forehead.

At this point it must be obvious that I am not well versed in exotic herons, or else I might have recognized the bird. The Sibley's eastern guide I was carrying didn't show anything quite like it. Then I recalled a posting from the New York State birding list I'd barely paid attention to a week or so earlier, an anecdotal secondhand report, forwarded from New Jersey, about an unnamed birder who'd seen an unusual heron near South Amboy, NJ, that might have been a Western Reef-Heron. I'd have done well to brush-up on the species, but

there'd been no follow-up and I filed it away as the sort of unverified "heads-up, just in case" type of report that only gets passed along because in birding "you never know."

I certainly didn't know, and I couldn't help wondering about other possibilities like aberrant plumage or even hybridization. Some herons have light and dark morphs, and Little Blue changes from white to dark as it matures, and what did a Reef-Heron look like, anyway? I watched the bird for a while (almost two hours by the camera clock, though the time seemed much shorter in the field,) and was able to take multiple photos using a 12X image-stabilized digital point-and-shoot, capturing (I hoped) all the field marks, and I thought these should be sufficient to make an ID. It is with some chagrin that I must admit to a compulsion to figure the bird out for myself, and it was not until I'd made the short bus ride home and checked various internet and print references that I notified Lloyd Spitalnik of Metro Birding Briefs, NYC's rarities-only listserv, of what I was by then confident was indeed a Western Reef-Heron. A picture I emailed and posted on the web was quickly confirmed by local experts as *Egretta gularis gularis*, a bird not previously recorded in New York State. Then the rare bird rush was on. Unfortunately, by the time other birders got to the park the tide was high and the Reef-Heron had disappeared along with the mud flat.

I was much relieved when the bird was refound the next morning and seen by many birders (Fig. A, p. 321). It was not seen on the 10th, but returned on the 11th, establishing an inconsistent pattern of sporadic appearances which alternately frustrated and delighted visiting birders until late August, by which time the bird had been extensively discussed and documented, and served to focus attention on a rather unlikely little urban park.

The nominate subspecies of *Egretta gularis* is native to West Africa and has strayed to the Western Hemisphere on a number of occasions. Most records are from the Caribbean, especially Barbados (AOU 1998), and it was only in 1983 that this taxon was first recorded on the North American continent, when one spent much of the spring and summer on Nantucket, MA (Veit and Petersen 1993). That stood as the only record until 2005 when a bird was seen in southeast Newfoundland during June and July (Mactavish 2006). In 2006 there were further sightings in the Northeast: in Nova Scotia 26 Jun-2 Aug (Mactavish 2007); and on both sides of the Maine-New Hampshire border 9 Aug-20 Sep (Ellison and Martin 2007). The Nova Scotia and New England reports from 2006 were generally assumed to be of a single individual, and that likely the same as the Newfoundland bird of 2005.

Although the identity of the Brooklyn bird as a nominate Western Reef-Heron is straightforward, this taxon's status among several Old World members of the genus *Egretta* is in some question. Various experts (e.g., Sibley and Monroe 1990 and del Hoyo et al. 1992) have come up with very different classification schemes in trying to render the relationships, not only between the western and eastern subspecies of Western Reef-Heron, but also among these and several taxa usually ascribed to other species, including Eastern Reef-Heron (*E. sacra*), Dimorphic Egret (*E. dimorpha*), multiple forms of Little Egret (*E.*

garzetta ssp.), and even our own Snowy Egret (*E. thula*). Little Egret has bred successfully on Barbados and represents another potential North American colonizer. Little Egret reports in North America have increased, but the recent discussions brought out the point that while Little Egret is presumably always a white bird, *E. g. gularis* has both a dark and a white morph, with the white form being quite close in appearance to Little Egret, offering an alternate possibility perhaps not sufficiently scrutinized among reports of Little Egrets in North America.

The Brooklyn sighting has led many to assume that this is once again the same individual, a single displaced bird, possibly weather-driven to begin with, perhaps now wintering in the Caribbean and making progressively shorter migrations up the east coast each year, maybe in response to an increasing frustration with breeding prospects in the New World. Some scenario of that sort seems plausible, and probably more likely than that a species heretofore almost unknown in the area should become a regular visitor all at one go. Still, some have pointed to the Cattle Egret's 20th century colonization of North America as a precedent, and it's worth at least considering the possibility of more than one bird in the cluster of sightings over the last three years.

Images from 2005 and 2006 show birds that are not readily distinguishable from one another. The Brooklyn individual looks about the same, but on 15 July sharp-eyed birders with scopes noticed that it is missing the hallux, or hind toe on its right foot. The birds from the last two years had all toes intact, which doesn't necessarily prove anything as the hallux might have been lost during the intervening winter, but it provides a useful mark if the species should reappear somewhere along our coasts in 2008 (of course only a bird with an intact right hallux could definitively be distinguished from the Brooklyn heron, whether or not it had a left hallux, but the other possibilities: left hallux without right, or no hallux at all, might still be interpreted as at least suggestive...).

So New York's first Western Reef-Heron is arguably a slightly used bird, its pedigree ill-understood, and of uncertain origin. But whether it's passed this way before, and whether it came here of its own impetus, or blown by a storm, or even assisted by some ship, the bird attained a certain celebrity of a particularly New York sort, which extended to its habitat of choice as well.

The New York metro area is a rather intense birding environment. The city's favorable location combines with the presence of a large number of highly skilled and knowledgeable observers to produce an ongoing parade of rarities, which are obsessively documented, scrutinized and knocked around on the Internet. Within the boundaries of the world's most iconic city, storied sites like Jamaica Bay and Central Park can on a given day provide birding experiences of the most sublime sort.

Calvert Vaux Park is not exactly sublime. Even so, the unprecedented heron was not found in one of Olmstead's handcrafted landscapes or along Long Island's celebrated barrier beaches; it turned up in a dumpy little park in Brooklyn that few birders even knew about. If they did, it was probably as Dreier-Offerman Park, a name I first heard in connection with a Lark Sparrow that was a one-day wonder in August of 2006. For most of the birders who

descended on the park in search of the Reef-Heron, it was their first visit, and some were less than favorably impressed. Of the many Internet accounts my favorite was from the blogger who stated: "Upon arriving one can only think: boy, this is a hole... Looking around at this desolate post-industrial wasteland I really had to wonder what sort of dedicated nut-job birder would have ever come down here to go birding in the first place."

I'll take that as a compliment.

I believe in neighborhood birding, or what's known as "working your local patch": a regimen of regularly focused attention devoted to sites proximate to the daily doings of one's life. It won't extend your list like chasing after vagrants, but this sort of birding earns an intimacy of place, be it ever so humble, that has its own rewards. Beyond the birds, it forges a marriage of focus and locus, serving to bind us to the land and attune us to the passing seasons and the deeper rhythms of life. And every once in a while you do see something surprising.

Actually, I'm not even all that surprised any more. Wherever I've lived around New York City I've discovered apparently marginal habitat that nevertheless brings in the birds. After finding things like a Red-necked Grebe in the polluted strait between Brooklyn and Queens, or an Ash-throated Flycatcher in the greenway along the Belt Parkway in Bay Ridge, I'm convinced that there are a lot more of these surprises around than ever get noticed.

I started birding Bay Ridge in 2005, mostly at Owl's Head Park, a small hill at the upper end of the Narrows. It can be a great place for migrant flights in spring and fall, but during the winter the adjacent coastal waters became more interesting. Working my way along the shore, I found that there were more birds east of the Verrazano Bridge, and I found myself venturing further, visit-by-visit, along Gravesend Bay, and by last winter to the Coney Island Creek outlet and Calvert Vaux Park.

At least that's what the sign says. The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation changed the name of the park to commemorate the underappreciated partner of Fredrick Law Olmstead. Viewing the site it seemed like a strange way to honor the man who arranged the architectural details of such artful landscapes as Central and Prospect Parks.

Most of Vaux Park's 73 acres is landfill from the building of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, deposited near the former site of the defunct Dreier-Offerman Home (for unwed mothers) which lent the park its original name. A Parks Department website claims that the park "has undergone several improvement projects and renovations in recent years" including a 1995 clean-up that removed 60 truckloads of debris and over 80 abandoned cars. Be that as it may, they didn't get it all, or else fresh supplies are still coming in. The tidal cove where the heron was found was once an active boat basin, but it became, literally, a dump, and the falling tide reveals a classic array of urban detritus: machine and automotive parts of all description, including a wide range of tires, along with bed frames, shopping carts, miscellaneous small appliances and assorted lesser trash. Adding to the atmosphere are the rotting hulks of several

derelict wooden barges, reminders of an earlier time when any stretch of city waterfront was home to a vibrant harbor culture that's largely disappeared.

The rest of the park is a work in progress, if not regress. A system of paved paths dissolves into gravel, and though its soccer and baseball fields are well patronized, the margins are totally unkempt. At the bay-ward west end of the park overgrown grasses make for a miniature prairie effect, but elsewhere the dense undergrowth is rank with mugwort, knotweed, ragweed and poison ivy, woven into dense thickets disguising a tumbled terrain of uncertain footing that plunges abruptly near the shoreline. Such paths as can be found through the brush are apt to reveal the sordid remnants of unwholesome nocturnal activities. It's a queasy mixture of fecundity and ruin that may not be to every birder's taste, but the birds themselves seem to like it.

And I liked it, or I liked the birds, enough to keep coming back, from the desolate winter to the blooming spring. There always seemed to be something worth seeing, and I was increasingly impressed with the range of species to be found. Winter's display of diving ducks, loons, grebes and gulls gave way to spring land birds like an early American Pipit, or a day in March with a good 15-20 American Woodcock. Where the parking lot lapsed into gravel, Killdeer appeared. Passerines arrived, and many stayed to nest, including Willow Flycatcher, Yellow Warbler, Common Yellowthroat and Brown Thrasher. Meanwhile the mudflat was attracting a variety of shorebirds and waders, as well as breeding Horseshoe Crabs. Skimmers ploughed the surface of the creek and terns wheeled overhead.

All of which I observed in a handful of visits before 8 July 2007. Once the Reef-Heron arrived, a host of birders descended on the park, exploring its ways, negotiating paths through the homeless encampments, and posting GPS coordinates online for pertinent holes in park fences. And they found a few other birds too. I subsequently compiled as many sightings as I could, and solicited information from local birders to develop a checklist for the site. The result is currently at 157 species, which is derived from a relatively limited pool of reports, but represents a good sample of the broad spectrum of birds that might be expected in our area, as well as a few surprises.

So the misplaced heron brought about an increased appreciation of the possibilities of even our lesser urban parks, and at a time when the ecological future of its chosen neighborhood is very much in flux. The bird made it into the local papers, where its presence was touted by preservationists opposing construction of a waste transfer station planned for virtually next door to the park. It might have become a martyr to the cause when on 27 July three rifle-wielding young men were apprehended by police after birders reported them shooting at herons in the tidal flat. The weapons turned out to be BB guns, and the Reef-Heron was not present that day, but the incident served to remind us that not everyone appreciates nature in the same way. Then, as if on cue, the Mayor appeared, holding a press conference at Calvert Vaux to announce a new round of parks spending, including a 40 million dollar makeover of what he continued to refer to as Dreier-Offerman Park.

Plans for the park (whatever you call it) include an unfortunate amount of artificial turf, and a kayak launch into the tidal basin. There's to be a nature center, and some attempt is made to maintain the unique environment, including the rotting barges, favored heron roosting spots which will stay, not so much because they are picturesque, but for fear their removal would dredge up toxic sediments. Arguing against the park's improvement is a bit like longing for the old, sleazy Times Square, but any serious attempt to make it respectable will doubtless reduce the habitat available to birds, while increasing all the problems that come with human contact. The park has been "improved" before, and plans often change on their way through the bureaucracy, but at a minimum I would expect the diversity of nesting birds to decline with the clearing of the extensive cover, though the location should still be propitious for occasional migrant fallouts and vagrants.

It remains to be seen then what sort of turning point the summer of the Western Reef-Heron may mark for Calvert Vaux *nee* Dreier-Offerman Park, but if the bird should return next year it might have trouble recognizing the spot. As it was, the Reef-Heron continued to be seen at the park throughout July and into mid-August, but its appearances were fitful, and the question of its alternate haunts led to much speculation and searches of likely sites around the Lower New York Bay area, east to Jamaica Bay and the Rockaways, and south around Staten Island and into New Jersey's Raritan Bay, where the apparent first sighting had been made near South Amboy. A few scattered flybys were reported, if not necessarily verified, but no other regular feeding or roosting locations were discovered before the bird showed up at Great Kills Park on Staten Island near the end of its sojourn. There was speculation about inaccessible spots like Hoffman Island, in the bay about midway between Vaux and Great Kills Parks, but nothing was ever proven.

And then the bird was gone, the last sighting I'm aware of having been reported from Great Kills on 24 Aug.

Given what I've said about there being more birds in more unassuming places than we ever know about, there's no need to suppose that this Reef-Heron, unique as it might be, couldn't have simply gone unnoticed in some other rarely birded spot along the margins of our city. It's even possible that if I hadn't happened to choose that particular park on that particular day the bird would never have been verified at all. None of which detracts from the wonder of an unanticipated visitation from a wanderer between two hemispheres. The bird provided one of the great thrills of my birding career, though it posed more questions than it answered, and in the end taught me more about Brooklyn than Africa. But that's because the Exotic and the Local are interwoven concepts, and when they meet the one illuminates the other, as our Western Reef-Heron illuminated its little corner of Brooklyn in the summer of 2007.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank the many birders from New York and further afield who came to see the Reef-Heron, and whose observations enhanced our understanding of the bird and the site. And a big thanks to Shai Mitra for soliciting this account and contributing his expertise to the taxonomic detail, history of occurrence, and literature cited herein.

LITERATURE CITED

- American Ornithologists' Union. 1998. *Check-list of North American birds*, 7th ed. American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C. 829 pp.
- del Hoyo, J., A. Elliott, and J. Sargatal, eds. 1992. *Handbook of the Birds of the World*. Vol. 1. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona. 696 pp.
- Ellison, W. G. and N. L. Martin. 2007. New England. *North American Birds* 61: 36-41.
- Mactavish, B. 2006. Atlantic Provinces & St. Pierre et Miquelon. *North American Birds* 59: 564-565.
- Mactavish, B. 2007. Atlantic Provinces & St. Pierre et Miquelon. *North American Birds* 60: 500-501.
- Sibley, C. G. and B. L. Monroe. 1990. *Distribution and Taxonomy of Birds of the World*. Yale University Press, New Haven. 1111 pp.
- Veit, R. R. and W. R. Petersen. 1993. *Birds of Massachusetts*. Massachusetts Audubon Society, Lincoln. 514 pp.

