

A LITTLE EGRET (*Egretta garzetta*) AT BAY SHORE, SUFFOLK COUNTY, LONG ISLAND: NEW YORK'S FIRST

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On the afternoon of Thursday 20th May, I found myself at Gardiner Park in Bay Shore. This is not a site I visit particularly regularly but I was interested in a departure from the norm, Spring having been rather disappointing for me locally to that point. My wife and I had also had to cancel an out of state trip at the last minute so I had some time to kill. An early morning trip to Southards Pond Park in Babylon had yielded a Wilson's Warbler but little else, so I was eager for something different. After a short walk through the woods at Gardiner, I headed for the marsh, to try and get some sound recordings of singing Saltmarsh Sparrows, a great feature of this park in Spring.

Unfortunately, it soon became obvious that the strong wind was keeping them quiet so my attention turned to other activity in the marsh. I quickly noted my first Marsh Wren of the year singing nearby and was pleased to see a small roving flock of Glossy Ibis, busily foraging away to my left. A Great Egret flapped languidly past and dropped down near a second, smaller egret that was hunched low in a creek close to the eastern boundary of the park. I casually raised my binoculars to confirm the expected Snowy Egret. Dark lores... Interesting, at least they appeared to be at that distance, certainly not yellow anyway. I reached for my camera and fired off a few shots and zooming in, was able to confirm my impression of lore colour but the photos didn't help much with any other features, the bird being mostly obscured by vegetation. My decision to unburden myself by leaving my telescope at home was starting to feel like a bad one.

Unable to get any closer, I decided to just wait a while, hoping that it would move into a better position (ideally closer) for me to get a good look. After around 15 minutes, the bird flew a short distance along the creek and upon landing, I was certain I briefly saw two long head plumes. All of a sudden, this was looking like a great candidate for Little Egret. Unfortunately, I still had not been able to study the bird in any more detail and was vaguely aware that there had been look-a-like birds in the past which had caused false alarms. The bird then flew again, this time away down to the shoreline and out of sight. It was obvious that I needed to see this bird through a scope so I called some local birders who might be free to help me relocate it.

Ken Feustel was first to answer and I managed to convince him that it was interesting enough to interrupt his afternoon and take a look. The bird had not

reappeared by the time Ken arrived on site, but, working our way down to the shoreline, we were eventually able to relocate it some 500 yards east of the park. This presented another challenge; not only was it more distant than before, it was also now on private land. Watching the bird fishing along the shoreline around a corner and again out of sight, Ken agreed that from what we were able to ascertain, it looked good. With the battery power on my phone hovering just above zero, I made a couple of quick calls to try and negotiate access to where the bird was.

Taking some time to reposition, and now joined by some of the other local birders I had called earlier, the bird finally gave itself up and we enjoyed excellent views of the first Little Egret for New York State. At this point it was joined by a Snowy Egret, allowing a side by side comparison of several important features, putting the identification beyond doubt. Three photos can be found on pages 220-221 of this issue.

Soon after alerting the rest of the New York birding community, the bird took off and flew strongly south across the bay and out of sight. Fortunately, the bird was present again at Gardiner Park the following day and most people that were able to get there, managed to see it. Following the same pattern as the previous day, it flew south across the bay just after 6pm and this would be the last time it was seen.

DESCRIPTION AND IDENTIFICATION

Although superficially very similar to Snowy Egret, given adequate views and seen side by side, there were several notable plumage and structural differences between the two.

The two most readily distinctive differences were the dark lores and two long plume feathers emerging from the nape. At distance the lores appeared gray but on closer inspection had a strong blue or even purple tinge in good light. This feature, along with a flatter, less steeply sloping forehead, changed the facial expression considerably and also presumably accentuated the impression of the bill being longer than that of Snowy. The two lanceolate head plumes were strikingly long and there was no sign of the shaggy tuft of a Snowy Egret or putative hybrid.

Overall, the Little Egret appeared slightly larger and bulkier than the Snowy Egret, with longer neck and legs. The legs were also thicker and entirely black right down to the feet which were a rather dull orange-yellow.

Although affected by wind and posture there seemed to be a fairly consistent difference in the shape of the plumed back feathers, those of Little Egret tending to be held flatter against the back rather than curled up as in Snowy.

VAGRANCY AND OCCURRENCE IN THE ABA AREA

This bird constitutes the long overdue first New York State record of Little Egret, a species that has been widely predicted to occur for many years (it was prominent in Levine's (1994) poll of five authorities and rose to be decidedly the foremost candidate in the most recent analysis (Gochfeld 2010)).

Since the first ABA record in 1954, Little Egret has developed a fairly well defined vagrancy pattern into northeastern North America, with a series of records, possibly involving returning birds, from Delaware, New England and Canada. It has become annual over the past decade between April and September, but mostly April to June, and mostly from Massachusetts north (Howell et al. 2014). Indeed, 2015 alone boasted perhaps as many as five different individuals (New York, Maine, Ottawa, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland) all of which were found between mid-May and mid-June.

Elsewhere in the Americas, Little Egret has been successfully breeding in Barbados since the 1980s and more recently, Antigua. Conversely, there are very few combined records from Iceland and Greenland, suggesting that spring overshoots across the far north Atlantic would have been historically unlikely. Thus, there is strong circumstantial evidence to suggest that "our" Little Egrets originate as southbound fall migrants, cross the tropical Atlantic after overshooting their wintering grounds in Africa, and arrive in the Caribbean. It is inferred that some of these migrate north with Snowy Egrets and other herons the following spring, arriving in New England and the Canadian Maritimes. This is the method by which Cattle Egrets are thought to have reached the New World and records of other rarer wading birds such as Grey Heron and Western Reef Heron also fit this pattern.

As the species continues to breed successfully in the Caribbean, records in the ABA area are expected to increase proportionately. Furthermore, an impressive range expansion into northwestern Europe over the past few decades has dramatically increased the pool from which further potential vagrants are drawn. This is good news, for those New York birders who were not able to see this bird may not have to wait long for a second bite at the cherry.

LITERATURE CITED

- Gochfeld, D. 2010. Predictions of species to be added to the New York State Checklist, v. 4.0, *The Kingbird* 60 (4): 301-310.
- Howell, S. N. G., I. Lewington, and W. Russell. 2014. *Rare Birds of North America*. Princeton University Press. 448 pp.
- Levine, E. 1994. Predictions of species to be added to the New York State Checklist. *The Kingbird* 44 (4): 277-280.



Little Egret, Bay Shore, *Suffolk*, 20 May 2015, © Peter Morris. See article about the discovery of this long-anticipated first record for New York State, pp. 188-190.