

LITTLE EGRET AT GOETHAL'S BRIDGE POND, STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK

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We identified and photographed a hatching-year Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) on Staten Island on 8 July 2017. The bird remained only one more day, to 9 July, but was closely studied and photographed by multiple observers during these two days. It fed with a number of Snowy Egrets (*E. thula*) and Little Blue Herons (*E. caerulea*) during its stay. There is only one prior substantiated occurrence of Little Egret in New York State, at Gardiner County Park, Suffolk County, 20-21 May 2015 (Morris 2015), but there has been a substantial increase in records along the United States' Atlantic coast during the last 20 years, probably reflecting colonization of, population growth within, and vagrancy from, the Caribbean.

RRV found this Little Egret in Goethal's Bridge Pond (near Goethal's Bridge, at the northeastern corner of Staten Island, with a tidal connection to the Arthur Kill) during the late morning of 8 July 2017. JR-G, AC, SW, and IG all managed to re-find the Little Egret during the afternoon of 8 July, and to take a number of photographs (Figures 1, 2, and 3, pp. 47-48). Between that time and the early afternoon of 9 July, a number of additional observers managed to see it. The Little Egret could not be found after that day, despite extensive searching.

IDENTIFICATION

The egret's plumage was entirely white (Fig. 2), with no dusky tips on the primaries as on a Little Blue Heron. Furthermore, the bill lacked the extensively pale bluish base and heavy-based, tapering shape of that species. There were no elongated plumes on the head or chest. Compared to the Snowy Egrets that were present, this bird was noticeably large, long-billed, and thick- and long-legged. Its lores were clearly blue-gray and not yellow. The bill had a subtle paleness around the base, not visible from all angles or in all lights. This, in combination with the absence of breeding plumes, is indicative of a juvenile, or hatching-year individual. The legs were blackish, with yellow toes and a distinct yellow streak running about halfway up the back of the tarsi (Fig 1). In contrast, young hatching-year Snowy Egrets show extensively yellowish legs.

The Staten Island egret resembled a typical juvenile Little Egret in all respects and showed no characters to suggest it might be a hybrid. Characters that would indicate hybrid origin include shape and size intermediate between

Little and Snowy, yellow in the lores and bill, extensively yellowish legs (rather than just the toes and backs of tarsi), and appearance of tufted feathers on the crown, chest, and back. None of these characters was present, and we conclude the bird was a hatching-year Little Egret.

DISCUSSION

In addition to the absence of observable field characters suggestive of hybrid origins for this bird, there are additional, probabilistic arguments that support its identification as a Little Egret. Despite the close similarity and taxonomic affinity of Little and Snowy Egrets, no hybrid between the two species has ever been confidently identified, and there are rather few opportunities for such hybrids to be produced. Perhaps the most likely locations for hybridization to occur would be Barbados in the Lesser Antilles, where both species breed regularly, and coastal areas in the eastern United States and Canada, where vagrant Little Egrets have occurred regularly within the breeding distribution of Snowy Egrets. At Barbados, 15-25 pairs of Little Egrets have bred annually 1997-2006 and later, and a maximum of 10-12 pairs of Snowy Egrets bred there in 2001 (Massiah and Frost 1998, Buckley *et al.* 2009). During the 20 years that Little Egrets have nested at Barbados, only three mixed pairs (Snowy x Little) have been observed, during 1997, and these did not fledge any young (Buckley *et al.* 2009). Little Egrets have also nested at Antigua, in the northern Lesser Antilles (Kushlan and Prosper 2009), and there are 35+ records of birds at Trinidad and Tobago (Hayes and White 2001), though there is no record of nesting there as of now. At all of these sites where Little Egrets are most numerous in the New World, apparently pure individuals are the rule, whereas hybrids are unproven, not suspected, and never invoked in the cases of individual records.

It could be argued that vagrant Little Egrets in the eastern United States and Canada might pair with local Snowy Egrets, but this has never been observed, and pure individuals must be regarded as more likely than potential hybrids throughout this area. Snowy Egrets nesting in North America are unlikely to produce fledged young before late May at the earliest (Parsons and Master 2000), and fledged, independent Snowy Egrets are not commonly observed in coastal NYS and areas further north until August, later than the early July date of the present record (pers. obs.; S. S. Mitra, unpubl. data). In contrast, Little Egrets nesting at Barbados and Antigua nest earlier, with peak egg laying at Barbados December to February (Massiah and Frost 1998, Buckley *et al.* 2009). A bird fledged at Barbados in mid March could quite readily disperse northward to the New York City area before July, and we suspect this is likely the origin of the Goethal's Bridge Pond bird.

The major increase of Little Egrets in the Caribbean began about 1990, following a spate of earlier records during the 1950s and 1960s and then a hiatus during the 1970s and early 1980s (Murphy 1992). Because of the aggregation of

records during the 1950s and 1960s, it seems unlikely that Little Egrets were overlooked over the next 20 years, since birders were clearly aware of their potential vagrancy. Rather, as with other vagrant birds, it seems clear that successive waves of vagrant Little Egrets reached the Western Hemisphere first in the 1950s and then subsequently from the early 1990s to the present (Hafner *et al.* 1994, Lock and Cook 1998, Hayes and White 2001). Nesting was first detected in Barbados in 1994 (Massiah and Frost 1998; though circumstances suggested they may have been nesting earlier than that) and at Antigua in 2008 (Kushlan and Prosper 2009).

The increase of records (to about 40 now; Howell *et al.* 2014) in eastern North America north to Newfoundland, follows the time sequence outlined above, and is consistent with the idea that increased vagrancy is associated with population growth and range expansion (Grinnell 1922, Veit 2000, Veit 2008). Thus, a plausible explanation for the increasing frequency of vagrant records of Little Egrets in North America is that their populations in Europe (Fasola *et al.* 2010), perhaps northwestern Africa, but certainly in the Caribbean, are growing and producing young that are, in turn, dispersing.

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Figure 1. Little Egret, Goethals Bridge Pond, Staten Island, NY. Photo © James Muchmore. See article, pp. 11-14.



Figure 2. Little Egret in flight, Goethal’s Bridge Pond, Staten Island, NY. Photo © Isaac Grant.



Figure 3. Little Egret, Goethal’s Bridge Pond, Staten Island, NY. Photo © Isaac Grant.