

Cattle Egret

Bubulcus ibis

The short, thick-necked Cattle Egret spends most of its time in fields rather than streams. It forages at the feet of grazing cattle, head bobbing with each step, or rides on their backs to pick at ticks. This stocky white heron has yellow plumes on its head and neck during breeding season. Originally from Africa, it found its way to North America in 1953 and quickly spread across the continent. Elsewhere in the world, it forages alongside camels, ostriches, rhinos, and tortoises—as well as farmers' tractors.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

Compared with other herons, Cattle Egrets are noticeably small and compact. They have relatively short legs and a short thick neck. The straight, daggerlike bill is shorter and thicker than other herons. They have medium-length, broad, rounded wings.

Color Pattern

Adult Cattle Egrets are all white with a yellow bill and legs. In breeding plumage they have golden plumes on their head, chest, and back. Juveniles have dark legs and bill.

Behavior

Cattle Egrets stalk insects and other small animals on the ground in grassy fields. They are much less often seen in water than other herons. They nest in dense colonies of stick nests in trees or emergent wetlands, often mixed with other species of herons.

Habitat

They forage in flocks in upland areas such as pastures and fields, generally focusing on drier habitats than other species of white herons.

Cool Facts

- Cattle Egrets are native to Africa but somehow reached northeastern South America in 1877. They continued to spread, arriving in the United States in 1941 and nesting there by 1953. In the next 50 years they became one of the most abundant of the North American herons, showing up as far north as Alaska and Newfoundland.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 18.1 - 22 inches
- Wingspan - 34.6 - 37.8 inches
- Weight - 9.5 - 18.1 ounces

