HERODIAS GARZETTA.

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Little Egret.

Ardea garzetta, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 237.

— *nivea*, S. G. Gmel. Nov. Comm. Petrop., tom. xv. p. 458, tab. 17.

Herodias garzetta, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 560.

Egretta garzetta, Swains. Class. of Birds, vol. ii. p. 354.

Erodias garzetta, Macgill. Man. Nat. Hist., Orn., vol. ii. p. 135.

Garzetta egretta, Bonap. Tabl. de l'Ordre des Hérons, Compt. Rend. de l'Acad. Sci., 1855, tom. xl. p. 772.

To examine a neatly made skin of this immaculate Heron, or to look upon a well-mounted specimen in a cabinet, is very pleasing; but to view the bird in all its beauty my readers must visit the Little Egret in one of its native homes—a swamp or a wet and gloomy morass; for there, among the green-tinted reeds and other aquatic plants, he will see it to the greatest advantage, and be astonished at the extreme elegance and lightness of the object before him, the spotless purity of its plumage, and the gracefulness of the flowing hair-like feathers with which its back is adorned. To view all this, however, the breeding-haunts of the species must be visited; for at all other times it is simply a plain white bird, the ornamental plumes being thrown off as soon as the duty of reproduction has been performed. It is in this latter state that wanderers from their proper homes occasionally visit us. Such visits are, indeed, “few and far between,” yet they have been paid sufficiently often to obtain for the bird a place in the avifauna of our islands. It also occasionally occurs in Germany, France (Provence), Switzerland, Genoa, Sardinia, Sicily, and the Grecian Archipelago; and the Russian naturalist Hohenacker includes it among the birds of the country lying between the Caspian and Black Seas; but in the warm countries of Italy, Turkey, and Spain this fairy-like species is met with much more frequently; and in the opposite country of Algeria, and in North Africa generally, it breeds in all situations suitable for the purpose. Beyond this, its range extends throughout the whole of Africa, from north to south, all over the Nile-district, Asia Minor, Persia, India, China, Japan, Java, and Australia. If it is not as numerous in all those countries as it is in Italy, Spain, and North Africa, it certainly occurs in and is considered by all ornithologists to form part of the avifauna of each country. It is not found in America, but is represented therein by a nearly allied species, *Herodias candidissima*.

Macgillivray states it has never been met with in Scotland; Thomson, that it is of extremely rare occurrence in Ireland; and the same may be said of England, very few instances of its being killed here being mentioned by any author, though, could we give credence to the assertion that one thousand were served up at the celebrated feast of Nevil, Bishop of York, in the reign of Edward IV., it would seem to have been very numerous at that date; but, with Dr. Fleming and Mr. Selby, I suspect the bird intended must have been the Lapwing (*Vanellus cristatus*), which then, as now, is abundant with us.

However this may be, the bird has been of very unfrequent occurrence in our islands during the present century, not more than seven or eight instances being on record in the works of Yarrell and others; to these I may, however, add another, for a knowledge of which I am indebted to Lord Hotham, who kindly obtained me the following particulars from the possessor of the specimen, James Hall, Esq., of Scarborough, Beverley, in Yorkshire:—“The Little Egret in my possession is a most beautiful specimen; it was killed by a labourer with a stick, in Ake Carr, near Beverley, about 1840, and was brought to me, tied up in a pocket-handkerchief, covered with black wet mud and blood, in which state it was sent to Mr. Reed, of Doncaster, and restored by him in a most marvellous manner.”

Numerous brief notices of the Little Egret are dispersed over the various volumes of that valuable ornithological record ‘The Ibis;’ and from these I shall now proceed to cull such extracts as may appear to be interesting.

Dr. H. Giglioli, in his Notes on the birds observed by him in the neighbourhood of Pisa in 1864, says *Herodias egretta* is very rare, and I have not seen it; but the smaller *H. garzetta* is abundant, and on the 15th of April I saw a flock of ten lazily flapping over the Arno in front of our house, their snow-white plumage making a fine contrast with the dark foliage which borders the river.”

At Malta, according to Mr. C. A. Wright, the Little Egret is common in spring and autumn, when large flocks are often seen passing in company with *Ardea purpurea*.

Mr. F. Du Cane Godman saw some examples in a collection at Terceira, one of the Azores, which were said to have been killed in that island.

Lord Lilford states that the Little Egret is very common in winter on the coasts of Epirus, in which province some few remain to breed; he observed “this species on the Bajona river, and the lake of Scutari, in Albania, in great numbers in August, 1857. Those which frequent the shores of the Bay of Butrinto

in winter, and spend the day in wading about the marshes, collect together regularly about sunset, and fly in a compact body to the jungles at the head of the lake, where they roost. They appeared to pursue exactly the same course every evening; and I used always to consider their appearance in a body a sign that it was time to take up my post for shooting Ducks, in a small marshy pool between the proper right of the Butrinto river and the rocks which shut in the valley to the north. The Egrets almost invariably flew over this pool from west to east, and generally preceded the first flight of Ducks by about ten minutes."

The Rev. H. B. Tristram, in his "Notes on the Ornithology of North Africa," states that the Little White Egret is "universally distributed in small numbers wherever a suitable locality exists, and frequents familiarly the gardens and ditches of the oases. It breeds in society on the lake Tetzara, and, doubtless, in more southern marshes also." Mr. C. F. Tyrwhitt Drake remarks that a few may usually be seen in winter at Martine, in Eastern Morocco.

Mr. J. H. Gurney says that the bird frequents the Bay of Natal, in South-eastern Africa, but is much more numerous about the swamps of the Transvaal; and Captain Sperling, R.N., that it occurs at Mozambique and Zanzibar, and probably on the intermediate coast of the Ethiopian Region of Africa.

"Not even Lac Halloula, in Algeria," says Mr. Tristram, in his "Notes on the Ornithology of Palestine," "can rival the marshes of Huleh (Meroni) as a paradise for Herons, with this advantage, that the breeding-places are wholly inaccessible to man. That treacherous swamp, extending for seven miles, with its deadly malaria, affords a secure haven, under its waving tufts of papyrus, for any number of Heronries." Among the many species of the *Ardeidae* there met with by him, the Little Egret was common, but scattered, and not very sociable.

Capt. Beavan includes it in the avifauna of the Andaman Islands, the truth of which is confirmed by Col. Tytler, who remarks, "I have had this species alive and identified it."

According to Dr. Jerdon the Little Egret is very abundant in India; and there it always nests and lays its four or five blue-green eggs in trees—a statement confirmed by Capt. Beavan.

Mr. Swinhoe states "it is common at Amoy all the year round, and builds in heronries in large banyan trees. It is also abundant at Hongkong, Macao, and Canton; and in Formosa it is a very common resident species, associating (especially in summer) in large flocks, and breeding in company in bamboo and other plantations. I procured a fine male, in full plumage, on the 14th of March."

Dr. Schlegel informs us that the specimens killed in Japan are precisely like those from the other countries inhabited by the bird.

With regard to Australia, I have three or four specimens from that country, which appear to be quite identical with European examples; and C. Coxen, Esq., of Brisbane, has sent me an excellent photograph of the bird in its finest state of plumage: it is a species not yet figured in my folio work on the birds of that country, though noticed at p. 305 of the Handbook.

Meyer says:—"The localities usually resorted to by the Little Egret are the swampy banks of rivers and lakes where the flags and reeds are of low growth, or the vicinity of woods and large trees (in which it roosts at night). Its flight is rather quicker than that of the larger species; but in windy weather it is very helpless and is obliged to skim low over the bushes and reeds from one piece of water to another. But when the weather is fine, it may be seen, if startled by intrusion of any kind, circling high up in the air, as if surveying the neighbourhood before it finally decides upon its course." It is said that it may be partially domesticated if taken young, and that its habits and manners are then gentle and harmless: it is also stated that its ornamental plumes were formerly used to decorate the helmets of warriors, as they still are by the Persians and Turks.

"This little Heron," says Bailly, in his 'Ornithologie de la Savoie,' "is occasionally killed on the borders of the Rhone, the Iser, the lakes of Bourget, and the Marches and their very marshy environs. It generally appears singly or in small companies of from two to five, rarely in greater numbers, at two periods of the year—in April or the first half of May, when it is clothed in its beautiful wedding-garment, and again towards the end of July or the beginning of August, with its autumn dress more or less complete. About the same time it appears on the lakes and marshes of Switzerland, but rarely visits the interior of that country. Being not very wild, it readily admits of approach, whether seeking its food among reeds and grasses, or perched on the trunk of a tree or on a stone. During its stay with us it feeds upon the spawn of frogs and fish, young frogs, fish, worms, leeches, and small reptiles. It nests in Sardinia and Sicily, selecting for that purpose damp and marshy places suited to the habits of wading and aquatic birds, several couples breeding in company. The eggs are from three to five in number, pointed at both ends, and of a very pale greenish blue, without spots."

The Plate represents the bird a trifle less than the natural size, with reduced figures in the distance.

Gould, John. 1873. "Little Egret, *Herodias garzetta* [Pl. 23]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323982>.

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