



Note the reddish-orange bill,
indicating peak breeding plumage

Brunswick Wildlife Cattle Egrets Flock with the Cows

Chances are you have seen Cattle Egrets in fields and along Brunswick County roadsides and highway medians. They look out of place foraging in grass instead of on coastal marshes. They are often associated with cattle or seen following farm and mowing equipment.

True to their name, they are not out of place because they forage in small flocks on insects disturbed by large animals or equipment. If you are lucky, you may occasionally find one standing on and picking insects off the back of a cow.

Watch a flock long enough and you will see their “leapfrog” foraging style, as birds at the rear fly over the flock to take the front.

Cattle Egrets are waders that forage, bathe, and nest in wetlands usually within a multi-species rookery. Often Ibis, Great Egrets, Wood Storks, and other waders share the rookery, each with their own nesting niche but with little distance between species.

Within wetlands, Cattle Egrets do not forage in open water but around the edges and they also enjoy fields flooded by irrigation

Cattle Egrets are native to Africa and they colonized the Americas during the twentieth century. South America was colonized after large forested areas were cleared and grazing animals introduced.

They began to colonize North America in the early 1950's and rapidly increased their range. They are now widespread and common.

Today, Cattle Egrets are found throughout the United States and southern Canada from spring through fall. They breed across the Gulf Coast, up the Mississippi, and north to the North Carolina/Eastern Virginia coastal plains. They overwinter to the southern rim of the gulf coast states, south Florida, the Caribbean, and Central and South America.

Keys to their ability to rapidly colonize are their tendency to disperse plus their gregariousness, abundantly-available diet, breeding success, and foraging adaptability. Of course, humans have helped with the conversion of large areas to pastures for livestock and to rice fields.

Cattle Egrets compared to other waders, such as Snowy Egrets, are stocky with relatively short bills, thick necks, and short legs. They vigorously pump their heads as they walk.

In breeding (alternate) plumage they have buff plumes on breast, head, and lower back. Their legs are yellow-green and their irises are yellow. However, in peak breeding plumage, the adults have bright reddish-orange bill, irises, and legs plus light pinkish-purple lores as shown in the photo of the bird in flight.

Non-breeding birds have white plumage with a small pinkish-cinnamon crest. Their bill, lores, and irises are yellow and their legs dark green.

In young egrets, the plumage is totally white except for small light-buff area on crown. Their legs are black and they have a dark bill, which is the easiest way to distinguish juveniles.

Next time you see a flock of Cattle Egrets and can safely pull over, it's worth the stop. You may be treated to quite a show!

John Ennis



Adults share incubation duties so this bird is guarding the nest from overhead, waiting for its turn



Cattle Egrets generally forage in small flocks, often following mowing or farming equipment