

# Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher,

Jim Butler

70 Year Expansion

WHEN I was born in 1941 there were no Cattle Egrets in Australia. They invaded Australia from SE Asia and were first recorded in 1948 at Oenpellie in west Arnhem Land. They then expanded rapidly, reaching Brisbane in 1963 when a pair nested at Long Pocket. Now they are found across the top of Australia and down the east coast to Tasmania. All of the Cattle Egrets in Australia have been born within my lifetime! They are one of the world's most successful bird species, their range covers every continent and consequently they have informative local names: Cow Heron, Elephant Bird, Rhinoceros Egret. Their continental expansion has been facilitated by two

factors: they are highly migratory and dispersive; and their habitat has expanded by extensive land clearing for the increasing livestock herds worldwide.

The Cattle Egret (50cm) has snowy-white plumage and yellow bill during the non-breeding months (February to September). However, in the breeding months (October to January) they regale themselves in vibrant orange-rufous plumage. So extensive in this colour change that they appear to be another species entirely. The photo above was taken in a specific week of the breeding period when the bird briefly has the full courtship flush with the beak vividly coloured. They are typically seen in flocks foraging in the grass around the livestock or standing on the livestock.

The Cattle Egret is named because of its close association with livestock. They prey principally on grasshoppers, but also spiders and frogs, disturbed by the large animals; and they stand on the cattle to search for prey. The survival value of this association has been demonstrated. Studies have shown that cattle



egret foraging success is much higher near a large animal than in an empty paddock. When foraging with cattle, the prey capture rate is 3.6 times larger than when foraging alone.

Congratulations  
Cattle Egret!

~ Jim

Images: (Top) Cattle Egrets in breeding plumage by Ed Frazer at Brookfield  
(Above) Cattle Egret in non-breeding plumage by Carson Dron at Anstead

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