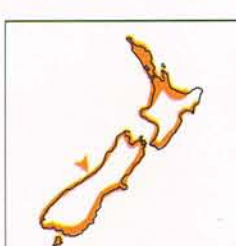


Medium to large elegant wading birds with long neck and legs, straight dagger-like bill and long unwebbed toes. Flight strong, typically with heavy languid wingbeats on broad wings, neck folded back and head tucked in, and legs trailing. Sexes alike. Immatures of most species are like adults but duller. Many species have ornamental plumes, which may be on the head, back and chest, sometimes distinctively coloured. The colours of bill, facial skin, legs and feet may become brighter or change as birds come into breeding condition. They feed in shallow water or on damp pasture, walking slowly or standing motionless and lunging at prey. Diet is mainly aquatic animals. All may make a harsh grating call in flight; otherwise silent except at breeding colonies. Many species breed and roost communally, others are solitary. Lay 2–5 blue-green eggs on a platform of sticks built in trees or on cliffs.

**WHITE HERON (Kotuku) *Egretta alba***

Uncommon native

92 cm, 900 g. Clearly the largest all-white heron. Long thin S-shaped neck with a distinct kink one-third back from the head; fully stretched *neck is longer than the body*; *black line of gape extends past the eye*. In breeding plumage, elegant filamentous *plumes on back* extend beyond the folded wings and the tail. Bill black; facial skin green; legs black, yellowish above 'knees'. In non-breeding, plumes absent, bill yellow, facial skin greenish yellow and legs black. Usually solitary, standing or walking sedately in shallow water. **Habitat:** Coastal freshwater wetlands and estuaries, occasionally wet pasture. In NZ, breeds only at Okarito, West Coast, but disperses throughout mainland. **Breeding:** Sep–Jan. [Sp 108]



**HERONS, EGRETS and BITTERNs** Ardeidae

About 65 species; 10 in the New Zealand region, including 5 breeding species. An endemic species, the New Zealand Little Bittern *Ixobrychus novaezelandiae*, became extinct in the late 1800s.

This family occurs worldwide, mainly in the tropics. Their broad-winged flight is ponderous but strong, though the smaller species are faster. Apart from the bitterns and night herons, they are active by day. They have a slender body and long neck and legs; night herons have a stouter body and a shorter neck. All have a straight, dagger-like bill and a short tail. The bill, on a long, often kinked neck, is ideal for seizing or skewering fish.

Patches of powder down are on the breast and rump in bitterns, and the thighs also in egrets. The middle of the three forward-pointing toes has serrations along the side like the teeth of a comb and is thought to remove fish-slime and mud during grooming and preening. All species give a low-pitched croak when alarmed but feed silently.

Egrets and herons are very similar: for example, all have bare facial skin, often distinctively coloured. Egrets are white; herons are usually grey: the distinction is useful but not absolute. Egrets are gregarious and breed in colonies, often mixed with other egrets and with ibises; true herons are solitary. Both typically have plumes when breeding. Their nests are untidy platforms of sticks and twigs. Incubation starts with the first or second egg, and so chicks are of different ages and sizes. Adults feed the young with regurgitated food, not offering whole food. The young start breeding at one or two years old, sometimes still in immature plumage.

Herons, egrets and bitterns feed mainly on fish; also frogs and insects. Larger species may take small mammals and birds as chance offers.

**Reading:** Hancock, J. & Elliott, H. 1978. *The Herons of the World*. London: London Editions. Hancock, J. & Kushlan, J. 1984. *The Herons Handbook*. London: Croom Helm.

**108. WHITE HERON *Egretta alba***

Plate 25

**Other names:** Kotuku, Great Egret, Great White Heron

**Size:** 92 cm, of which length of body is under half; 900 g

**Geographical variation:** Of the four or more subspecies, the range of the largest, *modesta*, is India, China and Japan to Australia and New Zealand.

**Distribution:** Breed worldwide in tropical and temperate regions. In New Zealand, they breed only near Okarito, Westland. After breeding, they disperse widely, especially northwards; therefore they can appear at any shallow freshwater lake, swamp, damp pasture, estuary or mangrove creek at some time. Some have reached the Chatham, Auckland and Campbell Islands as strays blown off course during this dispersal. From time to time, their winter number is augmented by irruptions from Australia, such as a small one in 1952 and a large irruption in winter 1957, when 200+ birds were

recorded, mainly in Northland, Waikato, Bay of Plenty, Canterbury and Otago.

**Population:** 150–200 birds, half of which are non-breeders.

**Conservation:** Protected rare native. The White Heron colony at Okarito is in a reserve, and public access is controlled to minimise disturbance to breeding birds but allow viewing from observation hides.

**Breeding:** The Okarito colony has been known since pre-European times. It is in a kahikatea swamp through which the sluggish Waitangiroto River crawls. Some of the nests are in the crowns of tree ferns; others are in kowhai or kamahi. Royal Spoonbills prefer the adjacent taller kahikatea. Both sexes share nest-building. Laying is in September–October. They lay 3–4–5 pale bluish-green eggs (52 x 36 mm). Both sexes incubate for c. 25 days and care for the young. The fledging period is c. 42 days, and the young leave the colony at c. 64 days old. The oldest banded

White Heron was a bird in the United States that lived over 22 years.

**Behaviour:** White Herons make a harsh grating call in flight; otherwise silent, except at the breeding colony.

**Feeding:** Diet is mainly small fish and eels, frogs, shrimps and aquatic insects, which they swallow whole, and occasionally small

mammals such as mice and small birds such as Silvereyes. They feed by quietly walking or standing motionless, lunging with their dagger-like bill and a kinked neck at prey whenever it comes within range.

**Reading:** Andrew, I.G. 1963. *Notornis* 10: 311–315.