

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.

LITTLE EGRET *Egretta garzetta*

Uncommon Australian migrant

60 cm, 300 g. Small dainty all-white heron with long slender black bill; facial skin yellow; legs and feet black except for yellow soles. Black line of gape ends level with eye. In breeding season, plumes on nape, chest and back; the 2 nape plumes are strap-like, whereas chest and back plumes are filamentous. Very active when feeding, dashing about in pursuit of fish, often with wings raised and with a high-stepping gait. Often solitary but may associate with White Herons. **Habitat:** Coastal lakes and estuaries. [Sp 109]



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.

Hérons, 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.

109. LITTLE EGRET *Egretta garzetta*

Plate 25

Size: 60 cm, 300 g

Geographical variation: Two subspecies: *garzetta* breeding in Africa and Eurasia, and *nigripes* breeding in Australasia.

Distribution: Breed from Africa and southern Europe, east to India, Southeast Asia, China, Japan, Indonesia and Australia, including Tasmania. They are scarce annual migrants to New Zealand from Australia, usually arriving in autumn and departing in early spring. They sometimes overwinter. Little Egrets have been recorded at many localities,

mainly coastal, throughout the North and South Islands. Most are in singles, but occasionally groups of up to five are recorded. Two vagrants reached Raoul Island, Kermadecs (1974).

Behaviour: Little Egrets are quite unlike White Herons or Intermediate Egrets in their feeding methods; they are very active, chasing after fish and other animal food with a high-stepping gait, wings upraised. They prefer estuaries and other tidal wetlands to freshwater habitats.