

# BIRD IN THE HAND

Corella, 1989, 13(1): 24-26

## IDENTIFICATION OF NESTLING EGRETS (*Egretta* sp. and *Ardeola ibis*)

MAX MADDOCK

Faculty of Education, the University of Newcastle,  
and Shortlands Wetlands Centre

The four common egret species in Australia, the Great Egret *Egretta alba*, Intermediate Egret *E. intermedia*, Little Egret *E. garzetta* and Cattle Egret *Ardeola ibis*, frequently nest in multi-species colonies, and accurate identification is particularly important when comprehensive marking operations of nestlings are undertaken.

Advanced young leave the nest when disturbed by the bander and scramble to outer or higher branches. This presents the problem of separating the members of the different species of white birds of similar size and superficially similar characteristics which have come from nests in the same tree or group of trees.

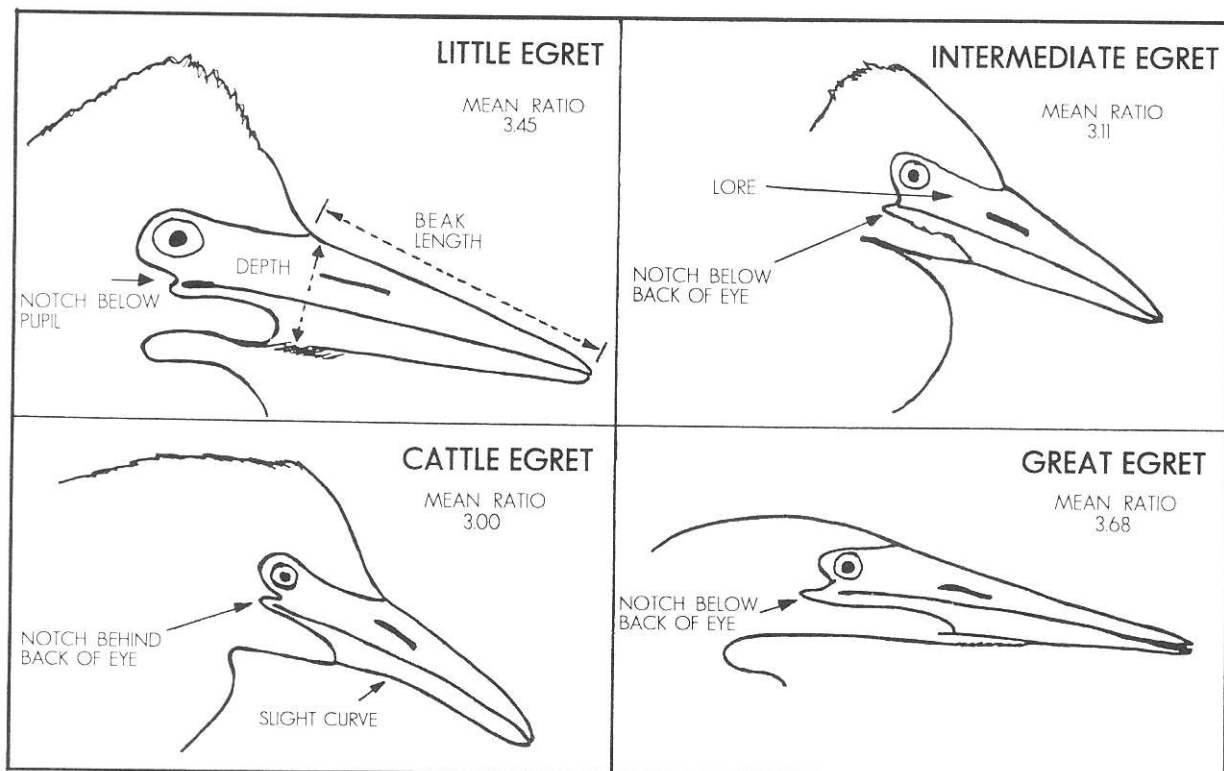
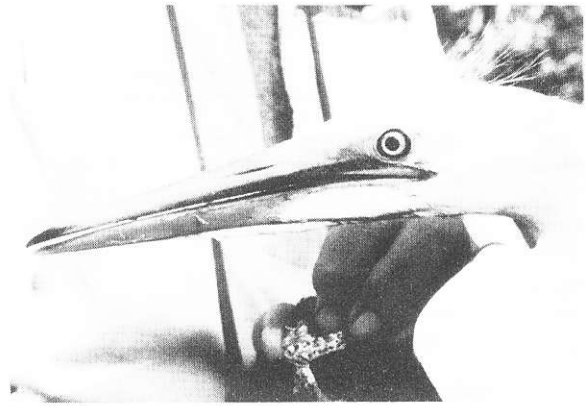


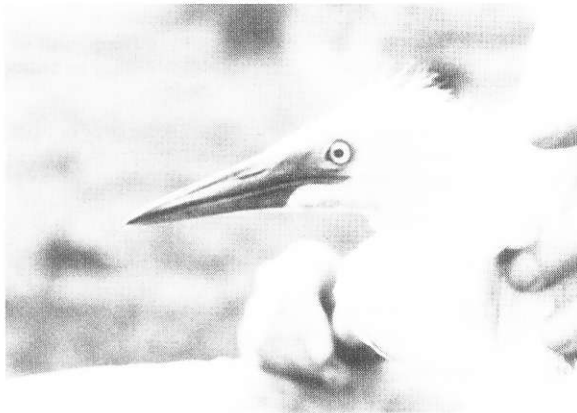
Figure 1. Beak profiles of nestling egrets (relative sizes not to scale). From Maddock (1988).



CATTLE EGRET



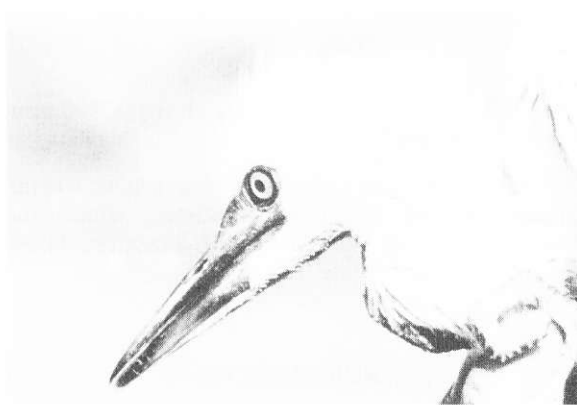
GREAT EGRET



BLACK-BILLED INTERMEDIATE EGRET



YELLOW-BILLED INTERMEDIATE EGRET



BLACK-BILLED LITTLE EGRET



YELLOW-BILLED LITTLE EGRET

Plate 1. Nestling egrets illustrating characteristic 'jizz' of face of each species.

TABLE 1

Summary of diagnostic characters of nestling egrets.

	LITTLE	GREAT	INTERMEDIATE	CATTLE
Gape Notch (Fig. 1)	Below pupil: almost non-existent	Distinct: behind back of eye	Distinct: below back of eye	Distinct: below back of eye
Beak (Fig. 1)	Long, slender	Long, robust; slender in proportion to length	Robust; straight profile	Robust with slight downward curve
Mean length/depth ratio	3.45	3.68	3.11	3.00
Forehead	Distinct	Flat	Distinct	Distinct
Crown of head	White	White	White	White when young; buff when approaching fledging
Beak	Yellow; black-tipped yellow; variegated black-yellow; gape line sometimes black	Black-tipped yellow; black gape line	Yellow; black-tipped yellow; variegated black; gape line sometimes black	Black; yellow-tipped black; yellow-tipped grey; diffused grey or black-yellow as nears fledging
Tongue	Pink; yellow	Black; grey; pink or yellow with black approaching fledging	Black or grey; pink or yellow with black approaching fledging	Pink; some grey or black, and pink; black (rare)
Hard palate	Predominately yellow; may be black or have black marks	Black; yellow or pink with black approaching fledging	Black; yellow or pink with black approaching fledging	Black or grey; pink or yellow with black approaching fledging
Lores	Yellow; variegated black-yellow; black	Greenish yellow	Yellow; yellow and black	Same colour as beak
Iris	White; cream; yellow	Cream; yellow	White; cream; yellow	White; cream; yellow
Skin	Greyish green; green	Greyish green	Yellowish green	Greyish green
Soles	Yellowish or yellow	Pale grey	Pale grey	Grey

The following diagnostic features are taken from Maddock (1988), which should be consulted for more detailed discussion. Several of the characters exhibit some variability, and these are given in Table 1 in decreasing order of occurrence. Each egret shares some with at least one other species. For these reasons, most characters should be used in combination. The key one is the extent of the notch of coloured flesh at the gape of the beak (gape notch) (Fig. 1). The bill length/depth ratio is calculated as bill length (tip to base of culmen) divided by the bill depth at the rear of the nares. (Fig. 1). Size can be used to separate Great Egrets from other species after a certain

age (bill length > 65 mm; wing chord > 250 mm; tarsus > 90 mm).

Each species has a characteristic 'jizz' or overall appearance of the facial features, which the bander learns to recognize with practice. These are illustrated in Plate 1.

## REFERENCES

- Maddock, M. (1988). Field identification characteristics of nestling egrets. Proceedings of International Symposium on Wetlands (1986). Shortlands Wetlands Centre and University of Newcastle Board of Environmental Studies.