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## The Slatey Egret *Egretta vinaceigula* is a good species

by C. W. Benson, R. K. Brooke & M. P. Stuart Irwin

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At the outset we should explain that we consider that the most suitable English name for this species is as above. Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1962), for instance, use 'Brown-throated Heron'. But according to C. J. Vernon, a paper by whom on this species follows the present one\*, in life it appears much more slate coloured than the Black Egret *Egretta ardesiaca* (Wagler), of which it has sometimes been placed as a colour phase. Also, from museum skins, it might be inferred that the vinous throat is the most diagnostic feature, but in life it is usually difficult to see, since as often as not, according to Vernon, the bird is walking away from the observer.

The Slatey Egret *Egretta vinaceigula* (not *E. vinaceigularis* as in Mackworth-Praed & Grant 1962) was described by Sharpe (*Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 5: 13) in 1895 on two male specimens collected by Thomas Ayres at Potchefstroom in the Transvaal and which are now in the British Museum (Natural History). It was not recorded again for many years until R. H. N. Smithers collected another male at Kabuta in the Caprivi Strip on 7 July 1958 (Smithers 1964). Doubt has arisen whether the Slatey Egret is a species or a variant (mutant or colour phase) of the Black Egret *E. ardesiaca* (Wagler). Roberts (1940) treated it as a straight synonym of the Black Egret. Bock (1956) in his review of the herons did not see material but placed it as a colour phase of the Black Egret on the grounds that Sharpe's original description did not indicate any other difference from the Black Egret beside the rufous or, more correctly, vinous throat. Bock's view has been followed by the S.A.O.S. List Committee and by McLachlan & Liversidge (1957, 1970) but not by Clancey (1965) or by Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1962). We have received field reports which suggest that there is a difference in ecology between the two forms and have therefore re-examined the specimens and are satisfied that the Slatey Egret is a good species.

Sharpe originally placed *vinaceigula* with *ardesiaca* in the genus *Melanophoyx* which he erected in 1894 (*Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 3: 38) on the grounds that it differed from the new world *Florida* Baird 1858 by having elongated plumes on the crest and breast and with the back plumes not reaching beyond the tail. He regarded it as similar to *Florida* in that the bill or culmen was not as long as the middle toe including the claw. Bock (1956) placed both genera in *Hydranassa* Baird 1858 on the ground that the scapular plumes were lanceolate to filamentous, not aigretted. He noted that the Reef Heron *E. sacra* (Gmelin) of Asia and Australasia had both types of scapular plumes. He also mentioned a wild hybrid between the Snowy Egret *E. thula* (Molina) and the Little Blue Heron *E. caerulea* (L.) reported by Sprunt (1954). We follow White (1965) and Clancey (1965) in placing all these herons in *Egretta*

\* Vernon's paper will be in the next number—Ed.

Forster 1817. It may be that Bock (*op. cit.*) did not do this because he felt reluctant to sink any more genera than he had already done in his review.

Although still only known from three specimens the Slatey Egret *E. vinaceigula* can be shown to differ consistently from the Black Egret *E. ardesiaca* in having a vinous throat, a pale base to the lower mandible, white bases to the shafts of the primaries, a dull yellowish green (not black) tarsus and a shorter wing and culmen (see Table). There is also apparently a tendency for

Table. Measurements in millimetres of the Slatey Egret *Egretta vinaceigula* and the Black Egret *E. ardesiaca*.

Slatey Egret	3♂♂		
Wing	229	240	242
Culmen	53	57	57.5
Tarsus	83	85	86
Black Egret			
		Africa	
♂♂			
Wing	244-273 av. (18)	266.4	
Culmen	58- 69 av. (17)	64.5	
Tarsus	78- 92 av. (15)	85.3	
♀♀			
Wing	235-263 av. ( 9)	249.0	
Culmen	56- 66 av. ( 8)	62.3	
Tarsus	78- 89 av. ( 7)	84.9	
		Madagascar	
1♂			
Wing	242		
Culmen	67		
Tarsus	89		
4♀♀			
Wing	237-250 av.	244.0	
Culmen	60- 61 av.	60.5	
Tarsus	79- 88 av.	84.2	

Note: Culmen lengths are from the posterior of the nostril slit.

the Slatey Egret to have broader bases to the plumes on the chest but occasionally the Black Egret has them as broad. The Slatey Egret would however appear, on the very limited material, to be somewhat variable in the colour of the underparts. In *Cat. Birds Brit. Mus.* 26, 1898; 105 Sharpe writes:—"Both examples of *M. vinaceigula* are adult birds with well developed crests and praepectoral plumes, as well as ornamental plumes on the back. One of them has the breast and abdomen washed with vinous, and in addition to the upper throat, the centre of the lower throat and some of the long praepectoral feathers are also vinous". The abdomen of the latter specimen is pale grey whereas that of the Bulawayo specimen is blackish, and the latter is also particularly richly coloured on the throat. It appears that the Slatey Egret is somewhat variable in appearance, but the differences noted at the beginning of this paragraph are constant and we are confident that we are dealing with a discrete species. In both species width of the primaries and notching on the inner web are variable as is the shade of blue-black above and the length of the back plumes.

In its ecology the Slatey Egret feeds either solitarily or in company with Black Egrets. When solitary it feeds away from the water's edge in moist grassland. It is not known to bring its wings over its head to form an umbrella or hood as does the Black Egret: field data from the Chobe Game Reserve from A. J. Tree (pers. comm.) to M.P.S.I. and T. N. Liversidge to R.K.B. The Slatey Egret may be seen sparsely but widely in the Okavango

Swamps, the Chobe Game Reserve, the Caprivi Strip and the Kafue Flats (R. J. Dowsett in *litt.* to R.K.B.) and it must also occur in south-eastern Angola. However it seems likely to have a relatively very limited distribution in south-central Africa compared to most other African Ardeidae, and is possibly of relict distribution, perhaps in unsuccessful competition with *E. ardesiaca*. In the last century it occurred at Potchefstroom (whence three old specimens of *ardesiaca* have also been available), but perhaps only as a vagrant, though may be found there again as well as elsewhere in South Africa. Most recently, Tree (in *litt.* to R. K.B.) writes that G. Wilson and M. Woltner, experienced members of the Cape Bird Club, found a breeding colony of this species on the 10th or 11th May 1971 some fifteen miles up the Chobe River from Kasane. There were some eight pairs nesting in reeds c. 1 m above the water. The reeds were too dense to permit entry, let alone allowing an examination of the nests.

The Table contains mensural data on the two species as represented in the collections of the British Museum (Natural History) (all measurements by C.W.B., including a Potchefstroom specimen of *ardesiaca* in Cambridge) and the National Museums of Rhodesia in Bulawayo (wing and culmen measurements by R.K.B., tarsus by M.P.S.I.). The measurements for the Black Egret were taken from the whole range of the species, i.e. Africa south of the Sahara and Madagascar. There is no suggestion of geographical variation in these measurements, long and short measurements occurring haphazardly throughout the area of distribution. It will be noted that males average larger than females, but the overlap, together with the small sample, makes us hesitate to assign unsexed birds, particularly juveniles, to a sex on mensural characters, and therefore we have ignored them in the Table. A female Black Egret from Botswana is recorded as weighing 14½ ozs.

Anybody who has the opportunity to visit the wet areas of northern Botswana and the Caprivi Strip should keep an eye out for the Slatey Egret, should make notes on what is seen and communicate them to a journal for the information of all. We are obliged to Mrs. B. P. Hall for examining material in the British Museum with C.W.B., and to Messrs. R. J. Dowsett, T. N. Liversidge and A. J. Tree for field data communicated.

#### Summary

The Slatey Egret *Egretta vinaceigula* is shown on morphological and ecological grounds to be a separate species found chiefly in the Chobe River system of northern Botswana, and not a phase of the Black Egret *E. ardesiaca*, as held by some workers. The Black Egret is shown to be sexually dimorphic in measurements but to show no geographical variation in this regard.

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